

“LET ME TELL MY STORY”  
CHOOSING ISABEL AND HOW A METAPHOR  
MADE HER RIGHT

Joanne Carroll

DCA

2009

Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Production Note:

Signature removed prior to publication.

---

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Debra Adelaide for her assistance in my settling in to Doctoral studies and for her wise comments on the novel. I thank Dr Anthony Macris for his rigour and for challenging me to produce a better exegesis than I otherwise would have. Their supervision has been helpful and spot-on.

I particularly need to acknowledge the detailed research and passionate scholarship of Dr Raymond Evans, whose work on the Red Flag Riots illuminates my novel. I'd also like to thank him personally for walking me around Brisbane on a very hot day as we relived the events. I further acknowledge Dr. Evans' book *The Red Flag Riots* for the imagery Lev used in Chapter Nine about persuasion and the crowd as a canvas upon which the artist works. The words are in fact those of Konstantin Klushin in his undated writing *Parliament and Soviet* (Evans 1988, p. 86 and see note 17, p. 218).

I gratefully acknowledge Stephen Graham's *Undiscovered Russia*, travel writings of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from which I drew for Lev's recountings in Chapter Nine of a night spent in the Russia forest. Graham's book is published in full on <http://vologda-oblast.ru/main.aspV?=548>. First publication in London: John Lane; New York: John Lane Company, 1912.

I thank Dr Shirley Walker for her help in referencing a Judith Wright poem.

For history of Tenterfield and environs, I thank Ken Halliday, the Tenterfield Historical Society, the Tenterfield Museum (in the School of Arts) and the Tenterfield Library for their invaluable assistance.

Picture Queensland was a wonderful resource, throwing light on facts. Queensland Library provided much otherwise forgotten material. Queensland Art Gallery permitted use of images of two paintings from their collection.

Thanks to Roseanne Fitzgibbon for her hospitality and for showing me the area where I set "Aberdeen" and the Fergusons' house, and to John and Christine McCaffery for their hospitality and help in researching the Tablelands area.

Thanks to Amanda Carroll for her hospitality and long-distance driving skills and all in all for being an invaluable support to her sister during the writing of this novel and exegesis.

Thanks to Michael Coey and to Mary Morrissy for reading my thesis, to Sr Mary Shiel for proof-reading certain chapters, and to Dr Lorraine Shannon for her help with printing and binding, and for their support in general.

Thanks to Shirley and Bruce Sinclair, mother and step-father, for their interest and help whenever I needed it, offering assistance with research, reading drafts of the novel and endless encouragement.

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Abstract   | vii |
| <b>PART ONE – The Novel</b>  |     |
| <i>The Russian and Mrs Greene</i>  | 2   |
| Author’s Note  | 3   |
| Prologue   | 6   |
| <i>War</i>   | 10  |
| <i>Peace</i>   | 70  |
| Epilogue   | 232 |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>PART TWO – The Exegesis</b>   | 236 |
| “ <i>Let Me Tell My Story</i> ”  | 237 |
| <i>Choosing Isabel and How a Metaphor Made Her Right</i>   |     |
| Introduction   | 238 |
| Chapter One – “Let Me Tell My Story”   | 241 |
| <i>Theories of character; concentration on formal properties; the Intentions of the novel; the Red Flag riots of 1919.</i>           |     |
| Chapter Two – The Evolutionary Process   |     |
| I – The Original Cast  | 256 |
| <i>Opening scene on plain; early drafts; diagram of characters.</i>  |     |
| II – Contamination   | 261 |
| <i>Fey woman; Marina; Disdain a vital element?</i>   |     |
| III – Isabel’s Inner Life  | 270 |
| <i>Conflict between inner and outer; empathy.</i>  |     |
| IV – Enter the Older Woman   | 273 |
| <i>Prologues; early garden imagery.</i>  |     |
| V – The Novel Begins   | 276 |
| <i>Isabel is chosen; Indications.</i>  |     |
| Chapter Three – Dissecting Isabel  | 279 |
| <i>Disappointment; Inevitability; Ironic gap; limitations of First Person; Valerie Martin; Desire; Walter Benjamin and deciding.</i> |     |



|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Four – Metaphor of the Garden   |     |
| I – The Image   | 296 |
| <i>Theories of metaphor/symbol; Robert Weimann and Shakespearian imagery; W. S. Harvey; Penelope Fitzgerald and ‘Gate of Angels’; language as tool; subliminal message.</i> |     |
| II – The Garden of Eden   | 304 |
| <i>Primeval image of mankind; Biblical trajectory; Utopia.</i>  |     |
| III – Rambling Around the Garden  | 310 |
| <i>Isabel’s garden imagery; her past; garden not a neutral place; W.B. Yeats; Seamus Heaney.</i>  |     |
| IV – Origins of Image   | 321 |
| <i>Under the jacaranda; Petru Dumitriu; Monday morning.</i>   |     |
| V – Transformation  | 333 |
| <i>Unity; sensation.</i>  |     |
| VI – The Snake  | 341 |
| <i>Riots; Expulsion.</i>  |     |
| VII – But Too Much Has Changed  | 346 |
| <i>The letter.</i>  |     |
| VIII – The End of the Garden Story  | 349 |
| <i>Bleeding participants; underground.</i>  |     |
| <br>  |     |
| Bibliography  | 353 |

## Illustrations

|                            |     |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Diagram                    | 259 |
| <i>Under the jacaranda</i> | 321 |
| <i>Monday morning</i>      | 332 |

## Abstract

The thesis consists of a novel, *The Russian and Mrs Greene*, and an exegesis concentrating on the “character” problem. How would the story be delivered? After much indecision, the novel was written as if told by the character “Isabel Greene”. Isabel travels from her Tablelands home up to Brisbane where she stays with her wealthy cousin. Her marriage is dry. Through her connection with a working class Irish-Australian family she meets the Russian Bolshevik, Lev. It is 1918, war-time and the young men are fighting overseas while at home political ferment stirs. Isabel falls in love and in spite of her doubts and evasions she begins an affair with Lev. In Russia, the longed-for revolution has arrived and the Bolsheviks stranded in Australia want to go home. As war ends, the soldiers return bringing with them the Spanish Flu. Many of them also bring a loathing of the Reds. Isabel is caught up in the Red Flag Riots of 1919 as ex-soldiers take to the streets, attempting to burn out the Russians. All around her, lives are in turmoil. The Irish family falls apart, both her husband and lover are hurt by Isabel’s withdrawals and society is ravaged by sickness and political struggle. And Lev is arrested.

The bare bones do not hint at the struggle to find “Isabel”. The original intention, precious to the author, was to write about an Irish-Australian family before, during and after the First World War. The Eden-like youth of family members would be shattered by war. Their labour politics would be spotlighted. Instead, the novel did not yield until the lead character was found in Isabel Greene, a middle class lady caught up in her erotic situation.

Fresh historical research had a negative impact on the original intentions. In the exegesis, tracing early drafts shows that other characters might have taken the lead and how assimilation fed into the ultimate figure of Isabel. An analysis of limitations in her first-person narration with its ironic gap and emphasis on Desire seem to make her “wrong”. But is she wrong? The relationship between the author and Isabel is significant in the choice of character, and Isabel “relates” to other characters on the level of theme. In her loss of faith she also represents Us. Most importantly, through metaphor Isabel has lived the meaning of the most precious of the original intentions, the myth of the Garden.

# PART ONE

## THE NOVEL

*The Russian  
and Mrs Greene*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The year 1919 should have been a year of peace. What came to be known as the First World War officially ended in November, 1918. Estimates suggest 10 million died during that war, 20 million suffered serious injury and 10 million people became refugees. What happened next must have defied hope. An outbreak of influenza, now called the Spanish 'Flu pandemic, a particularly virulent infection, spread throughout the world. The massive movements of troops spread the disease like wildfire, and, while numbers are still disputed, modern analysts suggest from 50 to 100 million died during its heyday from March 1918 to June 1920. It attacked the young and healthy.

The Great War altered everything and after it the world was indelibly marked. Strikes, movements and demonstrations in Europe, Britain, the United States, Australia and elsewhere eventually led to further workers' rights and continuing waves of women's emancipation, the fruits of which we enjoy today. In Russia, the revolution of 1917 finally led to the victory of the Bolshevik Communists. In Berlin, the Spartacist Uprising which had begun as a general strike and was then joined by communists, was put down with force. The Communist Party was formed in the United States. The May Day riot in Cleveland, Ohio, was the most violent of a series of nation-wide backlash outbursts resulting from the Red scare. In France on the same day, a large left-wing demonstration led to violent confrontations with police. In India that year, the Amritsar Massacre took place, and in China the May Fourth Movement opposed foreign colonisers. In November, a mob lynched members of the radical Industrial Workers of the World in the US, and a few weeks later Lincoln's Inn in London admitted its first female student to the Bar. In 1919 Mussolini founded his Fascist Party in Italy. And Adolf Hitler, who claimed he had reacted against left-wing movements in Germany, entered politics.

In Australia, a couple of thousand Russians had entered the country in the pre-War years. Some of these were active Bolsheviks in exile. In 1919, the Red Flag Riots

took place in Brisbane. This novel is based on those events and owes a very great deal to the detailed and passionate scholarship of Dr Raymond Evans, particularly his books, *The Red Flag Riots* (UQP, 1988) and *Radical Brisbane* (The Vulgar Press, 2004). I also thank him for walking me around the site of the major incidents. The major characters of the novel are invented. Two minor characters, *Lucy* and *Vershkov*, are very loosely based on the story of Civa “Fanny” Rosenberg and A. M. Zuzenko.

*But only the dance is sure!  
make it your own.  
Who can tell  
what is to come of it?*

William Carlos Williams  
from "The Dance"  
*Pictures from Bruegel*

*then shall the lame man leap like a hart,  
and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water*

Isaiah 35: 6-7



# PROLOGUE

*MOSCOW, 1937*

The car drove slowly down the empty street, as snow crunched like shards of glass under its wheels. None of the men spoke. When a passenger in the back seat struck a match and the cabin shivered into shocked light, the driver rolled down the window, hawked and spat. The window groaned upwards again, slimed with dirtied ice, and inside the stale air greyed with smoke. Huddled in the darkness all around, the city slept. Or pretended to.

In the still night, the river creaked and broke apart. The gurgling of freed water was too faint for anyone to hear.

Moscow was white, sloping rooftops, cobbled squares, white heaped on window ledges and the bare boughs of trees, on statues of heroes gone silver-haired before their time. A day ago the river was hard, packed with snow right up to bridges that had concocted themselves into kingdoms and fairy-tales. They'd become iced drawbridges where troikas once had sledged, furs of dark mink and grey fox wrapped about the shoulders of princesses and enfolding their dazzling heads, their frost-reddened cheeks. The city could look like that in the full snow of winter, its mythical heart captured by the heavy fall. Now as spring thaw crept up overnight, it would rise and fly away. But the men were not imagining such things. One of them drummed his fingers on the cold leather of the seat in front of him.

The car crossed the bridge and slid silently to a halt outside a stone building that once had enjoyed the right to be unaware of its own quiet elegance. The four over-coated men climbed out from each of the four doors, closed them quietly and trudged through a foot of snow to get to the salted entrance way. The cigarette was tossed away, its tip reddening the snow.

When they'd reached the fourth floor, kicked in the panelled door, he rolled over in bed. He peered into the cruel light of the hallway to make out the shapes lumbering towards him, and he dropped his head back on the pillow in a daze of shock and relief. He'd been wondering for months which night they'd come. Now they were here and it was all over. He'd had a lovely dream, more's the pity. A

woman's eyes almost hidden under white furs, but not quite hidden. He'd been about to brush the mantle from her head, touch the luxury of her hair whose colour he still hadn't seen, damn it. He hadn't dreamt like that in a long time.

The covers were pulled from him and he was suddenly chilled. It occurred to him to dress in as many layers as he could manage, before they took too much control. He slid off the bed to his feet.

The electric light went on as he stepped into long underwear. He tugged them up one leg and hopped on the other, not caring even remotely how absurd he might look. He was belting his trousers when he heard the breakage. He froze, looked around. It was quite deliberate, of course. The photograph lay in the pool of light from his desk lamp, arced so that he wouldn't miss the full impact. The glass had shattered, torn into slivers like lost continents. Anna was only four in that photo, seated on a child's chair at her own birthday party, frowning with sober acknowledgement of her place in the constellation. His hair and his broad forehead appeared just above her curls, where he crouched in dumb servitude behind her. The passion he'd felt for her then had not ever been quenched. And now the man's boot slowly went down on her, ground the glass so that he could hear the clink of it and the powdering ruin.

He said nothing. He surprised himself with his own calm, the reasoned preparations he took as he sat back down on the sagging mattress, tugged on his boots. Whatever they were going to do with him, he would measure out his responses, invite nothing, yield only to the inevitable. After all, he was no stranger to this. He'd learned a thing or two, it seemed. He regretted not putting his daughter's picture in a less obvious place, that's all.

There was no point in hanging on to life. He'd thought about this all winter. He was closer to sixty than to fifty. He hadn't seen Anna in seven years, and his ex-wife was hardly likely to soften. He couldn't blame her for that. They hadn't married for love, but it was a sour kind of hatred now. Tonight there was strange satisfaction in their separation because if his daughter had been here in his apartment, as he'd longed for years, she'd be scared now. Shivering with cold and fear. His ex-wife had chosen well the second time. She'd moved to her new husband's domain in the warmer south of the country. Maybe his substitute was not quite the idiot Lev had thought. At least he knew how to play the game, Stalin's man. They couldn't touch Anna.

He slid his finger between his heel and the shoe, forced his foot quickly in. That's when he decided to deprive them of the letter from Australia, too. He'd read it again last night before he slept. He'd folded the five sheets back into creases she'd made so neatly. He'd imagined her fingers sliding along the edges. He'd imagined it not for titillation as he would have done in other times. No, but for closeness to her, for her palpability which became stronger as the years went by. Miraculously, he'd say, if he believed in miracles.

He stood again, turned and put the sole of his boot on the mattress. As he bent to lace it, his hand reached under the pillow and slipped the letter up his shirtsleeve. They were too busy destroying his things to notice. They'd pack up what they already knew they wanted to examine, tear the rest to shreds, rip the covers off books, drop whatever would shatter. There wasn't much he didn't know about it. The only thing he didn't know was where he was destined to end up. If it was Siberia, there was no escape this time. He was too old. And to what purpose, really?

Now a hand came down on his shoulder. He went still. Fear took the stomach no matter what. But he turned slowly, coolly obedient. These men weren't going to do a job on him. He saw it in the man's eyes. He was too high in the Party, perhaps he'd get off and then where would they be? He wouldn't get off, of course, he knew that. No one did anymore. But these men couldn't calculate that with certainty. He walked ahead of his captor. The other three began to gather at the doorway. Two of them carried piles of papers and balanced on top of one pile, he noticed, was a photograph of him and Pyotr Vershkov and Lucy. Vershkov had been arrested last summer along with seven others in their office building. He'd happened to be on the street as they were frog-marched out and bundled into the back of a van. Vershkov had seen him and looked away.

It amused him that one of the men bothered to pull the cord dangling by the door and the light went out. Such mannerly concern. Lev unhooked his heavy coat from the hallstand as he was pushed from behind. He wasn't going anywhere without that. He wouldn't freeze to death tonight.

The tenants in other apartments, all Party men of some rank in this fine building, would be cowering in their beds, if not under them. It would be their turn next, could have been tonight. The house was utterly silent except for the five of them stampeding down the stairs. No need for stealth anymore.

He'd drop the letter in the snow as he got in the car. If the police hadn't already seen it before it was delivered to him, he'd be surprised. Whatever about that, they couldn't have it now. Her letters were the rope tying him to sanity. They became closer, she and he, speaking to each other in words they wouldn't use with anyone else. When the first one arrived almost a decade ago, he'd been stunned. Hopeful, for a mad moment. After a while, so slowly that he could hardly see how it happened, doubt rose in him. Not about the dream he could already smell had turned sick. About himself. Why had he done it? Why did he walk away from his other life, the one waiting for him on the untaken road? And hers too. He'd done it to both of them.

*WAR*

# Chapter One

*Eastern Australia, 1918*

“*T*his is a very bad time to come across town.”  
“Well, I’m sorry, Madeleine.”

“Don’t be silly, Isabel, it’s not you.” She attacks that horn rather viciously. “It’s this traffic. Peak hour. Where on earth do they think they’re all going in such a rush, I’d like to know?”

“The world’s gone mad,” I say agreeably. I’d told her it could wait till tomorrow. It was she who insisted we drive straight into town, when personally I’m quite fatigued after my train journey. How does she always make me feel so wrong-footed?

Directly in front of our car, the driver of a baker’s cart stands on his platform, a long whip in his hand. As Madeleine strangles her horn again, he turns his head and stares down at us and I clasp my hands together on my lap. He has the most enormous black moustache. His horse reduces its walk to an amble. It’s quite deliberate. He holds the reins in a squarish hand, which is now bunched and tightened. When he deigns to release us from his gaze and returns to the business of getting his horse and cart to the end of the bridge, Madeleine says, “Thinks he owns the road.” But she doesn’t hoot the horn again.

Mercifully he turns off to the right, up-river, and we proceed straight across into Melbourne Street. A tram clatters along beside us. This is the first time I have ever been in a private motor-car. I lack bravery. I say that with candour now, though when I was very young there was hurt in the knowledge. The disdain of disappointed adults hurts a child’s heart. What can one do? I cowered at the prospect of a three-legged race. There is nothing more to be said of me. But I am heady with this drive. Madeleine turns the steering wheel with alarming casualness and the thrill I feel is visceral. I slowly stretch my arm along the door’s ledge. The speed of the vehicle creates its own breeze, puffing my sleeve.

“What’s the number of this place?” she says as we enter a side street, quieter.

The scrap of paper is in my handbag. I can’t trust my memory with numbers, though forty-one comes as clearly to mind as if it were printed behind my eyes. Of course, that happens to be my age. I’m butter-fingered with these gloves and the breeze plays havoc with the note.

“Don’t lose the thing.”

“Forty-one,” I say.

The brick wall of a foundry runs down one side of the road, and further along I see a church with a stone cross on its peak. Beyond that is a clapboard hall behind a paling fence. Madeleine brings the motor-car to a crawl and we both peer at the houses on the other side, each on their own pockets of land, their gardens attaining various degrees of success. It’s a strange kind of a street, neither fish nor fowl.

The number is painted on a wooden post box. Overhanging the footpath, shading a patch of the road, is a tree that seems to grow like weed in this humid town. I don’t know its name. The last rays of a most unforgiving sun catch the windshield as she halts the car.

“I’ll wait here,” she says. The glossed, fatty leaves give a dappled effect to the coffee-coloured netting she draws down from her hat as she drives. She doesn’t bother lifting it. It’s difficult to see her eyes in this peculiar light.

The front door’s open. I’ve knocked too timidly. The hallway is long and silent, and I see from spills of light that two doors further down are also open. I’m sure I’m not alone.

“Excuse me,” I sing out. “Hello, excuse me?”

Should I just walk in? I wipe my feet on the dusty hemp mat, for all the good it does, and step across the threshold. A man suddenly springs from the last room.

I almost drop one of my parcels. He walks from the shadows towards me and catches it as it slides. Then he calmly lifts the other from the nest of my arms. I feel his warm hand touching my skin. He loops his fingers through the string ties.

“Whom do you seek, Madame?” he says in the most precise English. He is foreign.

I am a little shocked, I think, for I want to reply gaily, “I seek Katherine Martin.”

He waits for my answer not with the lazy glance of indifference men on streets cast these days and not impatiently as if a woman is wearing on the nerves. No, he waits differently. I have no idea who he is. Surely not the landlord.

“If you’d be kind enough, could you direct me to Katherine Martin’s room?” I say.

He gestures with a lift of the elbow. “May I show you?” he says.

He turns and walks away and out of a meek habit and guided by my anxiety over the parcels, because after all I haven’t the faintest idea what sort of a person he is, I follow.

I can’t resist the impulse to examine the room he came from, which I see has a window on to the side garden, a blind furled tight at the top, two single beds neatly-made, a table with a pile of books. He has caught me. He looks over his shoulder and stops still. Why does he stare at me like that?

I don’t suppose it’s a crime that my eye has wandered, is it?

He says, “We must go through the dining room to the back of the house.”

I nod curtly and we move off again. It’s kind of this workman to proffer assistance, I’m sure, even though I didn’t ask for it. And don’t need it. I see my reflection in the sideboard’s mirror, my over-large hat with the spiked grevillea bloom poked into the velvet band. I’d picked it off a bush in my garden just before I left for the station early this morning. I’m afraid it all looks rather silly, red tips more like the remains of a bloody encounter than the abandon I’d wished to promote. Madeleine probably thought so, too, when she saw me.

The mantel clock ticks deep as heart-throbs. It has the effect of silence. Its small glass door is ajar as if it’s very recently been wound, though there’s no sign of the key. The dining table is set with pepper and salt shakers, bottles of sauce and other condiments, a sugar bowl covered in bead-cornered muslin. The cutlery, however, is still not placed.

He holds another door open for me and allows me to pass, an awkward movement for him with his hands full. He smells of something a little sour, a little exotic, and I’m so close to him that I can smell his underarm, too, as he pins the door back. It’s violently warm in here. The kitchen is pregnant with the coming meal, one huge pot on the range, probably potatoes, and a more modest one gurgling carrot rings up to its watery surface. The meat must be in the oven. Is he the cook?



As he moves past me he seems to create a breeze, barely possible in this furnace of a room. He has stepped outside on to a narrow verandah, a widow's walk of the poorest kind, open to the air, the insects. He gazes back, as if to pull me from the kitchen towards him. I hear the erratic muttering of the simmering pots and his footsteps on the floorboards, echoing, dull. They've ceased before I come out into the air.

He stands at another doorway facing back into the house. He raises his fist and knocks. I'm just reaching him when I hear her say, "Yes?"

He looks at me. I lean towards the painted door and say intimately, "Katherine, it's Mrs Greene." The blue paint is peeling off in long strips as if someone has been at it with a chisel.

"Mrs Greene?"

"Yes, dear, I've just arrived up."

"Just a tick," she says.

I ready myself, stand upright and glance at him. I'd like to give the impression that I've dismissed him, though I don't usually wish to give anyone that impression. He tucks a parcel under his arm and pincers two fingers towards me. I jerk backwards. He peels something sticky from above my eye. He holds it up for me to see, a blue splinter the shape of a fly or a tiny frog, and I find myself holding out my hand for it.

The door opens. The girl is undressed, holding up a towel to cover the bodice of her petticoat. She cries out and slams the door shut again. I look at the man with embarrassment and I want to laugh.

Wordlessly, he holds out first one parcel, which I take from him, and then the other. Then he bows and walks away. I watch till he disappears into the kitchen.

"Katherine," I say softly. "Open up. He's gone."

The door opens an inch or two and I see her there, peering. "Is he gone?" she whispers.

"Yes. Look, I've got these for you," and I hold up the two packages.

"Oh, my God! I didn't know there was a man out here."

"Oh, dear," I say. "How dreadful of me. I hope I haven't caused you trouble."

"It's all right. He won't say anything to anyone. He's very nice and polite, really." But she has gone quite red in the face.

Her room is a hot-house. The closed curtains are in a dead drop. Her washing stand, a tripod affair, is out in the centre of the tiny room, the towel thrown on the chair beside it. The water in the bowl is murky with soap. She's left the bar in there.

"Is that your soap?"

"Oh," she says and attempts to fish it out while I drop the parcels and my handbag on her bed. Its spread is remarkably gay, deep red, Chinese-embroidered. On the wall she's hung a Chinese scroll, gorgeous spider marks in thick black ink, shifts of intensity in how the pen has been held. I've never seen Oriental art up so close before.

"Your mother sends her love. I was down with her last night," I say.

"I posted a letter off to her today. I'll have to write again tonight, tell her all about this, your visiting me."

"I would have given you notice, Katherine, but I only decided yesterday to come up. Where did you get these lovely things, the scroll and the bedspread? Were they here?"

"They're mine. I bought them off a Chinaman, Mr Sung. There's boats in the river that come all the way down from China."

"What a world! Imagine getting on a boat one day and sailing off to Heaven knows what."

"That's what I want to do," she says. "I don't see why I can't."

The room is so small that our two voices don't seem to fit. Katherine is such a passionate creature.

"You'd want to open these. She said one's food and the other has little things she's been making up for you."

Katherine rubs her hands with a corner of the towel, her eyes on the booty on the bed.

"Who is that gentleman? The foreigner?"

She holds up her finger to her lips.

"No, no," I say. "He's gone back into the house."

Her voice becomes a stage whisper. "The place is full of Bolsheviks. You know, Russians."

"My goodness!" I shove a parcel out of the way and sit down on the red bedspread.

"Sometimes I walk in and they're all talking Russian. Plotting revolution."

“My Lord, Katherine. Does your mother know?”

She shrugs. “They’d love to go home but the Government won’t let them.”

“Well, I don’t see why not. It’s a free country, isn’t it? Can’t they just get a boat?”

She shrugs again. “Well, according to what I hear,” she says. She does make me laugh, the little thing. “There’s an international conspiracy. To keep them out of Russia.”

“Oh, my. You’d think they’d want them to go, wouldn’t you, if they’re plotting revolutions. Here too, you mean?”

“Here and everywhere. They’d love the world to be for the people, not for the King and the Czar and everyone and all the money people, you know.” Her eyes have been wide, innocent and now she gazes quickly at the floor. She says, “The really rich money people, Mrs Greene, not just a little bit rich.”

“Well, I don’t suppose they’re going to bother shooting the likes of me.”

“Oh, no,” she says and she stares at me, alarmed. “They won’t shoot you.”

My feathers are a trifle ruffled by the way this conversation is going. I don’t believe I’m oppressing anyone and surely my heart is open to those in need. After all, I’ve gone to all this trouble to deliver packages, went down to Mrs Martin last night who lives in a public house into which I’d never put foot until she was forced to take a room there and then I carried the darn things on the train and in the cab, and got my cousin involved in the enterprise. And now I’m to be put up against a wall and shot.

“People judge others by the outside things,” I say. “That is why there’s a war.”

And that is my last word on the matter. In order to restore relations, I say, “When are you off work, Katherine? Perhaps we could go to a show.”

Her forehead has creased. She, too, resents the intrusion of world affairs and the way they have of tumbling people off fences, one side or the other. I don’t believe for a minute she’s ever considered me a snob. But she suddenly smiles very brightly.

“Yes, please,” she says. “Sometimes I’m off Wednesday afternoons, sometimes Saturday afternoon. The union got it for us.”

“Right, well, I’ll be up in Brisbane for a while so I’ll let you know. My cousin is outside, Katherine. I won’t stay. My, my, it’s hot in here.”

“You get used to it.” She lifts the blouse she’s hung over the back of the chair, pulls it on and buttons it with a concentration I’ve noticed in her since she was quite small.

“You look very well, anyway,” I say. “Quite the young lady.” I stand up. It’s quite dreadful in here. I can’t breathe at all.

“They make you look smart at work. We get all types of customers. I’m on the gloves counter now.”

“I imagine that’s a promotion.” I move pointedly to the door and open it.

The night is already blackening in that astonishingly immediate way it does so far north. But it’s still so hot, so humid. “I suppose it’s better than some other jobs,” she says behind me.

I have never worked. But even girls of my type may work these days. Everything is changing. Katherine is in a different boat. I know she sends most of her wages home to her mother and younger brothers.

She strides along the verandah, her strong shoulders held easily back, luscious hair piled on top of her head. What is she, seventeen, eighteen? She’s an intimidating force to the likes of me. I am, after all, rather foolish and of no use whatsoever in this terrible world.

“Give her a toot on the horn,” I say to Madeleine.

A moth drops to the bonnet, either dead or dying, and lies there in a grave of fallen leaves. My white lace handkerchief flaps in the air. Katherine stands in the light of the hallway, waving, and then begins walking down the garden path. We’re already at the next corner before, startled, I hear two loud honks. She’s at the gate now, still waving. Contorted in the passenger seat, I continue our farewell as we turn. What is she feeling? Lonely for all I so palely represent? I’m gripped with a longing to bring her with me and take good care of her, Katherine who has grown up under my eyes.

I poke my handkerchief into my waistband, but my foot remains at an awkward angle and for the moment I don’t seem to have the energy to adjust myself. Instead, I lean my elbow on the door’s ledge.

Madeleine drives quietly. We are again on the bridge, a tram rattling across beside us. There are lights on the water, fishing boats heading out, cargo ships heavy ghosts against the docks.

“Do you want to tell me now?”

“What?” I say. Her voice has shocked me.

She signals her intent to turn left and concentrates as we veer away from the town’s evening life.

“Why the sudden arrival.”

The river slides along with us. “I sent you a telegram from Toowoomba, when the train stopped for lunch.”

“I got it.”

“I know. The maid told me.” I hope I haven’t brought trouble on the maid’s head, speaking her mistress’s business. I pluck out the handkerchief again and bunch it in my dampened palm.

“You’re white as a sheet, Isabel. You don’t look at all well.”

“I’m just tired, that’s all. I’ve been travelling all day.”

“Have you had a fight with Christopher?”

I speak to the river, to the low-lying trees lapped by its water, “Not really.”

“You haven’t left him, have you?”

And now I gaze straight ahead at the two beams of light. It seems a precarious transport, this trusting vehicle, bumping over stones and pot-holes at such mechanical speed, foolish behaviour in the darkness.

There’s no point in not telling her, since she has guessed. “I don’t know what I’ve done,” I say.

## Chapter Two

**B**ackstage, corridors are surprisingly narrow. It seems we have to walk crabwise to allow the cast passage between dressing room and stage. When we see a tiny woman coming towards us, one of the chorus from the looks of her costume, Katherine and I immediately become accretions on the sickly green wall. As the woman approaches, the mystery of her make-up melts before our eyes, black liner loosed from its alluring contours, flooding inkily into the high-crimson rouge of her cheeks. She's wet with perspiration, her hair oiled with it, the brown mess of her powder turned to mud, her red blouse stained. She heaves with effort, her breath not under control, as if she's seen a most terrible sight. She is smaller than both of us, a bird-like woman.

Mr O'Meara, our kindly Virgil whom we have followed down these trails for the last two minutes, touches the creature's shoulder. She looks up at him, widens her lips and smiles and I suddenly realise who she is. I'm quite stunned at the transformation.

"Evelyn, my dear, you were never better," Mr O'Meara says. He purports to speak with an English accent, but surely he's Irish?

"Did I make you swoon, Bobby?" she says in a voice deeper than any woman's I have ever heard, suggestive in a way that couldn't help but attract even a woman, yet trouble her spirit too.

"I swoon whenever I think of you. Tonight, I fainted."

"Ah, Bobby, and still on your feet?"

The two of us watch, their gawping audience, till they laugh, a well-timed joke, their eyes sly with each other. Bobby O'Meara says, "Evelyn, may I present Mrs Isabel Greene and Miss Katherine Martin, friends of Madeleine Stevenson." And again, that look of slyness between them.

"What a pleasure," the actress says. "And is dear Madeleine not with you tonight? Ah, what a disappointment. Such a charming woman."

“My cousin spoke so highly of you, too, Miss Fontaine. She urged me to see your performance while I was in town.” I feel as if I’m in the play too, saying my few lines.

The woman’s tiny hands touch mine. She is terribly hot. “You must join us later. Bobby, they really must.”

“Absolutely. We’ll meet you down there, Evie, love. Don’t let us delay you. You’ll catch a chill.”

Her hands lift from mine and I understand that the interview is over. “Please don’t let us keep you, Miss Fontaine,” I say. “And thank you so much, we’d be delighted to join your party.”

“Marvellous,” and her gaze slides so quickly and so completely away from us that it feels as if we barely exist without it. Her heat wanes and there’s a chill left behind. Mr O’Meara has the look of a lonely boy as she moves on light feet up the corridor, another voice calling her name. When he catches my eye, he is embarrassed. He is quieter as he says, “Will we move on to the Albert? It’ll take them a while.” Katherine’s been silent for some time. She’s under-dressed, poor thing. I hadn’t realised we’d be going on after the theatre. I hope she doesn’t feel out of place.

“Katherine, does that suit you?” I say. She nods as if only half-present. She’s an unusual child.

As we leave the theatre and walk a few doors down the street to the hotel, I engage Mr O’Meara in conversation. Katherine walks along beside me, speechless, unpractised at this art. It’s exhausting, of course, but she must learn to make an effort. I had to.

The world is again brightly lit, mirrors, crystal glasses alive and brilliant, the feathers in women’s hair arching in the excited air. It hasn’t been like this for a long time, not for me. The place is packed. For Katherine’s sake, I must not give way now to shy nerves.

I take her arm and say, “Have you ever seen anything like it, Kate?”, and I smile knowingly at Mr O’Meara.

I think she may have been about to answer, but O’Meara is set upon by three shimmering women with loud and throaty voices, and a man of sixty who’s as gaudily volatile as his sparrow companions.

I wait patiently for our introductions. Overhead two black fans turn slowly and behind us blasts of heat scorch at our backs whenever someone pushes at the revolving door.

The bones of my face ache. We've barely moved, fitfully joined in forced conversations, dallied with pretend gallantry. Strangely, by the time I have a glass of lukewarm punch in my hand, I'm no longer enamoured. I've noted barbed exchanges more than once. I've never liked that.

I turn to Katherine who is sipping at her punch, her finger busily holding back a slice of orange against the rim of the glass. She's a lifeline in this gay mayhem and I see in her eyes, as her gaze roams curiously, a self-containment beyond her years. Beyond my years, to be frank. Among these bright peacocks, this sparkling glitter, I see her for what she is. She surrenders to the allure of the orange slice, plucks it from the glass and her teeth pull at the flesh. I don't know what she's going to do with the half-moon of skin.

"What do you think?" I say, close to her ear.

"It's fun."

"Is it?" I'm surprised. I look around again as if to see something I've missed.

"Oh, yes," she says. "They can't wait to forget everything."

"Maybe they never remembered," I say.

I don't know why I'm suddenly so distrustful of this tightly-packed party. I suppose I'm unsure of myself, as if I somehow failed the test when I entered the room, just as I usually do.

"Do you want to sit down?" she asks me.

"Oh, yes, I think so. If we can find anywhere."

She takes charge, steers her way around clusters of conversers, every now and then glancing over her shoulder to satisfy herself that I'm safely following. We are not ignored. Women glance at us, and men who are years older than Katherine take on a look of momentary stupefaction as she comes into their sights. They are like fish lured by a sun-catching glint, while she seems to notice nothing.

She's brought me over to the inside wall of glass doors. Chairs are scattered about but are all taken. We both look foolishly up and down as if this will cause a miracle. "Nothing," she says.



I begin to say a soothing word after all her valiant attempt, when through the bevelled panes of glass I see a man's figure, distorted, becoming longer as he approaches. I think I recognise him. "Katherine," I begin.

But he's already opened the door and he too calls her. "Katherine," he is saying.

She's drawn between us, looks at me, confused, and then turns her head. "Lev!" she cries.

He steps into our gilded room. "I saw you in the theatre."

"Mrs Greene," Katherine says, "This is Mr Kurakin, from my boarding house."

He bows his head, like a gentleman. I am a little shocked to see him. "Madame," he says. "A pleasure."

"But we've met before," I say, gauche. Am I so unnoticeable?

"Yes," he says and I realise instantly that he's avoided the memory of Katherine's embarrassment on that occasion. As I have not. "Yes," he says again. "I saw you at the theatre, madame, in your box. You have come up in the world, Miss Katherine."

"Oh, it's Mrs Greene's cousin that got it for us, didn't she, Mrs Greene? She's a patron, whatever that is."

He's looking at me rather too frankly. He is an unsettling man. "Your cousin is a kind woman, Mrs Greene."

"She is kind. I am –" and I stop myself from a rush of foolish disclosure. He gazes at me, waiting. "I'm on holiday."

"Holiday! We all need holiday. To forget ourselves for a moment."

"Forget ourselves," I say and I laugh.

Katherine looks at me. Mr Kurakin doesn't laugh either, though perhaps there's the edge of enjoyment in his eyes. I'm not sure I like this man.

"It's so hot," Katherine says.

"Too crowded in here," he says. "We're more comfortable in the other room. Would you care to join us, Mrs Greene?"

Katherine says, "Are there any seats?"

"We'll find some," he says.

Katherine suddenly turns into a child, her face softened and questioning as she asks, "Can we go in, Mrs Greene?"

The sensation that I'm responsible for this girl, that she looks to me for the nod of assurance, is unexpectedly pleasurable. I lay my hand on her arm, her skin hot under the white blouse. "Of course," I say. Though I am a little uneasy. I suppose she thinks him quite handsome, a man much too old for her. And a foreigner, of course.

Mr Kurakin has been watching this exchange quietly and now he gestures me forward. I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the image of walking past him at the boarding house the other day, of drinking in his smell. I almost brush his chest with my shoulder and this time there's a pungent odour of liquor, the reek of tobacco. Nothing unpleasant about it, I don't say that.

I identify his group immediately, sitting by an enormous window. They're so clearly foreign. Working people. As we approach, each of them turns to watch us. Three women, one as young as Katherine, seem to be appraising us, and one leans her head to another, makes a comment. Two of the men rise from their seats, gazing over my head for some indication from Mr Kurakin. I feel his hand on my back and I react like a scalded cat, jerk fractionally. No one else seems to have noticed my response yet I feel the hand unobtrusively drop. If he's put out, he doesn't show it.

He begins the introductions succinctly. He seems to lack the need to impress either me or his companions. They greet me courteously if somewhat coolly. I'll never remember the names. Katherine seems to know most of them, from the house I suppose. One of the men graciously offers me his chair and Katherine is given another on which she perches straight-backed. She's nervous.

I understand they've been speaking their own tongue and now they'll be obliged to switch. How silly of me to have ever presumed that a man stuttering English, groping for the word, must be rather stupid. These people aren't stupid. I see it in their eyes, in the way they glance at one another. It's we who are being judged, or perhaps I to be more accurate. What do they see? A woman faded into middle age, sheathed in pink silk, borrowed but of course they couldn't know that, a silly pink feather planted in hair which is not alive as it used to be nor as fair. I know what the Russians believe in. It's in the newspapers every day. And what they believe in, I am not.

As I consider this, my hands folded on my lap, Mr Kurakin leans down to me so that his breath is on my cheek. "Something cool to drink, Mrs Greene? Do you take wine?"

His darkened jaw is so close that I can see individual bristles pricking at the skin. I raise my eyes to his. "I've never had wine."

His face expresses surprise but he says only, "Would you like to try a glass of cold white wine?"

"Thank you." And he's gone. Why was I too embarrassed to ask for sherry? Does it seem too provincial? A warm flush rises in me though I attempt to gaze calmly over this nest of Russians, so casual in their posture, even the women. One of them fans herself with a theatre programme, but she is watching me.

The man beside me puts his elbows on his thighs, his chin on his fists, a movement of sorts towards me, and says, "Madame, you are relative of Katherine?"

Quietly, Katherine says, "No."

"No," I say. "Friend of the family. We live in a country town, sir, on the other side of the state border, in New South Wales."

"Ah," he says as if I've announced an extraordinary thing. "Not Queensland?"

"No. Across the border." And I lift my hand above my head. "Up high on the tablelands. It's not as hot as here."

I see him watching my hand, apparently an exotic bird to him, and I lower it. Then he rolls his own hand as if he's stirring memory, searching for the words. "Ah, yes," and his lips push forward and I wait. "Yes, I know this place, I believe." He looks around at the others.

The woman who stares at me from behind the slow flap of the pamphlet says, "The train stops there."

"Exactly," he agrees. "But I have not been off the train. Just travel to Sydney, you understand?"

Eager, I too lean forward. "That's quite correct. The train to Sydney goes through there. We are right on the border, you see." And I use the sharp edge of my hand to represent it. "On one side is Queensland where the train stops at the station and you have to change there on to another train, the one for Sydney."

"But this is so ... absurd, you might say." He's pleased with how this conversation is going, pulling English words out of a hat, the vaudeville magician. It is all very ridiculous. But I urge him on with a certain sympathy in my eyes. Our audience follows us with a fine balance of courtesy and boredom. I'm loath to let it go, to be reduced to silence again.

To my relief, he continues, "Why is there such a change, Madame? Can you explain it?" He opens his hands and delights himself with the triumph of humour into which he has drawn me.

"Absurd," I say. "Two different railway gauges."

"Yes! One fights with the other." The joke is getting hilarious and the others laugh too.

I shake my head, pushed beyond logic at the mad ways of men. "Don't ask me to explain it." As I laugh I'm dimly aware of the strains of music starting up again in the glittering room, the small orchestra hired for the evening. My fellow conversationalists also glance towards the glass-paned doors. Our train story has come to a hiccupping halt. Miraculously, a wine glass appears by my cheek.

"Madame," he says almost under his breath. Katherine reaches over me to take her cordial and the cuff of her muslin blouse slides back. Her skin is pale on the inner arm, three blue veins nakedly clear at her wrist, a delta branching almost painfully into the broad opening of her hand. I sip at the wine, bitter, cold.

I believe I'm older than anyone here, a faded flower. By a handful of years but it is a significant handful. These are mysterious men, mysterious women, something heated in them for all the ease of demeanour, reclining in their seats, ankles casually grasped across knees. And I'm terribly aware of Mr Kurakin's arm resting along the back my chair. He sits on a stool he found at the bar which he has intruded beside me.

Katherine is beginning to relax. She adjusts herself like a child, her knee drawn up a little as if at any moment she might curl into a ball, listen to the talk with her head in a warm dark hollow, just as she did years ago, a tiny peeping of her eyes.

The Russians' earlier conversation is apparently continuing, hospitably in English for the most part. Or perhaps not quite a continuation, who could tell? Their voices lower as if the foreign tongue requires wariness. And their eyes are following movements about the room. My new acquaintance, who's so intrigued by differences in the width of railway gauges, has forgotten me as he gazes through the window on to the street, surveying a gentleman passing quickly by.

The youngest of the Russian women, whose English seems perfect, hisses something I can't make out. They're discussing some battle, just as Madeleine and I did over the breakfast table, the newspaper spread open in my cousin's hands, the bottom of the page dipped carelessly in the marmalade bowl. But the battle that concerns these foreigners has been fought in Russia somewhere, not France. It's hard

for me to establish who is fighting whom. I examine the young Russian girl's face, Lucy they seem to call her, study the muscular workings of her jaw, a certain passion in her performance, her hand open and adamant. I realise that nothing is quite as it seems here, for she has an unexpected authority. She is listened to, and other heads nod in agreement. These women frighten me.

My back is stiff, and on my lap my hand is closed in a fist. Yet I don't want to leave. The bitter wine becomes palatable as one drinks more of it and it gives me something to do, to hold the glass to my lips and sip, to swallow.

A serving girl has appeared with her tray. As she silently takes up empty glasses, the conversation ceases. She's slow. I sense in her an urge to linger. She wipes a cloth rather haphazardly over the marble-topped table. An ash-tray is dirtied with the remains of their smokes and the burnt-out chars from someone's pipe, and yet she doesn't seem to notice it. A stain on the marble troubles her. She polishes at it, back and forth, with no great speed. Eventually we are all watching her. And then she tucks the cloth in the band of her white apron and walks away, her collection of glasses clinking worryingly against one another.

The Russian girl turns to the man beside her, who has said very little. His moustache droops on either side. She speaks to him in their own language and he, gazing hard at her, responds. A few of them glance towards us. Somehow the attention has focused on me.

Mr Kurakin says to me, "We are going somewhere else, Mrs Greene. More comfortable. It is near where we live, on the other side of the river."

"Yes, Madame," the moustachioed man says, surprising me with his address. "Forgive us, that we must leave. But if you would join us perhaps? The tram stops outside."

The others are already preparing themselves. The departure will be swift. I do not quite understand it.

"Thank you," I say, and I don't know to whom I'm speaking for they're all standing now. "But I shall hail a cab and take Katherine home, and proceed from there to my cousin's."

Mr Kurakin touches my arm and I look up, gaze into his face.

"Mrs Greene," he says, "We are going to a café near our boarding house. Come with us on the tram and later we can ... hail a cab, as you say."

I excused us to Mr O'Meara in such a hurried way that he looked puzzled for a moment. But he bid us goodnight effusively, more than glad to be relieved of responsibility. As I push through the crowd I catch sight of the leading lady, Evelyn, dressed in dark purple, her neck and face whitened by the contrast. Or perhaps aided by pale powder. She's surrounded, as I would expect. Laughing, her head is thrown back while her eyes, which disconcertingly are not taking part in the comedy, glint under her lowered lids. She's watching others in the room not yet involved, as if marking them off. She has spotted me. Her assessment is immediate. She sees the Russians, she takes in Mr Kurakin with his hand on my elbow, and then returns her gaze to me, nods imperceptibly.

## Chapter Three

**T**hrough the slits of my eyes, I see a mist of mid-morning light glint among rubbery leaves. There's a green interlock of them massed up behind the white balustrades of the verandah, pushing against the posts, fingering through the trellis work. Madeleine's garden is aswamp with leaf, under daily threat from torrid growth. Down here on the coast, no house withstands it unless effort is thrown back at it, cutting at it, pruning its edges. At this silent hour, it's in subtle equilibrium with me and with the verandah, with the air flowing endlessly through the rooms, the air which remains both coolly separate from it and suffers kinship with it.

"Dreaming?"

Madeleine's voice surprises me into movement. I shift in my seat and the plate of toast on my lap topples to my side.

"Oh, sorry," I murmur, and carefully lift the half-slice of buttered hot bread from my dressing gown. I haven't been quick enough. There's a dark stain of grease over the expansive fan of a peacock's blue tail.

"Stained?"

"Yes. Dear, oh dear."

"Susan will iron it out."

I hold the toast between two careful fingers. Madeleine's presence makes me uncomfortably aware of my clumsiness, and it seems unaccountably too difficult to retrieve the lop-sided plate from where it's wedged between my thigh and the bamboo struts of the chair, particularly with one hand.

"Just put the toast down, Isabel."

"That's what I'm trying to do." Madeleine has talked to me like this since we were four years old, and I've never got out of the habit either. My part in it has just become clear to me, as if I've stepped away and looked at us for the first time. "I am capable of dealing with a slice of toast, Madeleine."

“Oh, well!” she says as if it’s I who have insulted her, dismissing her dominion like that.

I was in such a good mood.

She drags her chair across to the edge of the verandah, deliberately scraping the feet along the floorboards, and then sits as if she’s exhausted from the effort. She drapes her hand over the railing, turns the palm consumptively up and affects to catch a breeze. “You were in late,” she says.

I’ve managed to dispose of the damnable toast and plate on to the table, and now I sweep at my lap for crumbs. Christopher would expect an explanation too, rightly I suppose. He’d sit and wait, or stand and wait, until I’d given it to him. I didn’t pay him a thought last night, not one thought. How very strange and sad.

“Did you have a good time?” she tries.

“Yes, a lovely time. Mr O’Meara was very charming.”

“Oh, good.” She’s pleased now. “I did ask him to take care of you. So? Who did you meet?”

“Some of the cast. The leading lady. We were invited to the party in the hotel down the street.”

“You didn’t take the girl along?”

“Of course I did. I couldn’t just tell her to go home.”

She taps her fingers against the wood as if she’s hearing music, only half-listening to me. She astonishes me at times with her sudden snobberies. And I’d been so awed lately by her letters, her radical leanings, her marches and protests, accounts of her standing up to hector various miscreants of politicians.

“What did you think of her?” she says.

“Of Katherine?”

“No! The leading lady. Evelyn.” She raises her eyebrows. “I believe she’s the most shocking gossip, so be careful what you say.”

I rub at a sore spot on my elbow and glance quickly at my cousin. I recall anxiously the look Evelyn gave me as I left the hotel, the wordless lack of innocence.

“I don’t think she likes other women,” my cousin states.

“I had very little to do with her. We didn’t stay very long.”

“Didn’t you?” She looks at me, surprised. So there has been no telephone call to report my sudden departure last night, no informing about my questionable companions. And why should there be?



I grip the delicate handle of the teapot, place the silver strainer over my cup and pour. The tea has turned murky. "Do you want a drop?" I say anyway.

"I'll wait till morning tea. I had breakfast before you woke."

I decide to keep silent. I'm used to her subtleties. Apparently I am lazy and dissolute, disgraceful in my night attire. Madeleine reaches overhead for a young green bough, bends it towards her face as if to inhale some barely present pungency. I try to tug the robe more closely across my breast.

The tea is bitter but I feel obliged to drink it now. Susan's arrival, hurried and unconcerned, saves me from it. "Message dropped in," she says.

We both look at her, follow the line of her plump arm down to where a folded sheet of paper is clutched in her hand. Madeleine releases a leaf she's been tugging and the branch bounces back. "No, Madam," Susan says. "It's for Mrs Greene."

"Oh?" she says.

"You wouldn't know who'd turn up at the door next," Susan says and she holds the note out to me. Her finger and thumb clamp its corner tightly as I pull on it.

"Who was it?" Madeleine asks rudely, but I'm heart-beatingly curious too.

The note has been folded into eights, grubbied by sweat. It stinks of tobacco, as if it has been in someone's unkempt pocket.

"Some foreigner. Come in a delivery van. I don't know why they don't learn to speak English if they want to live here."

My hands are beginning to shake. To hide this palsy from my cousin's eyes I lower the paper to my lap, smooth it out against the calico of my nightgown. Under it my legs are warm.

"Some of them don't want to be here. They'd rather be in their own country," I say.

I can hear the silence. I keep my head down.

Susan says, after Heaven knows what kind of look has been exchanged, "Let them, then."

"It's hardly O'Meara, sending a message on the back of a delivery van."

"It's from Mr Kurakin."

"Mister Who?" As if the name is too outrageous to be taken seriously. Madeleine is extraordinarily aggravating. Is it any of her business whom I receive messages from? Why doesn't the maid make herself scarce, for goodness' sake?

I concentrate on the unusual script, a handwriting completely unfamiliar to me. "It's from Mr Kurakin. He's an acquaintance of Katherine Martin's. We met at the hotel last night."

"Thank you, Susan," Madeleine says and the tone of her voice makes me look over at her. She's taken a sudden interest in the garden, a finger poised at the side of her mouth.

The maid touches the teapot with the back of her hand. "This is cold. Do you want another drop?"

"Oh, yes." Madeleine is feigning languor. "We might as well. Ask Cook for some scones, would you?"

She takes her sweet time leaving us, but finally she gives in and treads up the hallway in her heavy, black shoes. Madeleine raises an eyebrow again. She is so theatrical. "You met him last night?"

I refold the sheet of paper, using my fingernails to define the crease. I can sense her impatience and I bend to it. "I met him once before, the night I arrived, when you drove me to Katherine's boarding house."

"You didn't mention that."

"Oh?"

"And she made an arrangement to meet him last night, did she? Did she tell you beforehand?"

"No, Madeleine, she didn't make an arrangement. What have you got against her?"

"What do you mean? I've got nothing against her. I've never even met the girl."

"Well, you seem annoyed."

"I'm not annoyed." She pretends to laugh and grabs at that poor leaf over her head. "You just bumped into him, did you?"

"That's what happened. Bumped into him and he introduced me to his friends. And then they were worried about spies and we left the hotel."

As she stares at me, I shake my head slightly as if to say, well, you wanted to hear the story.

Madeleine has always been smarter than I. The gradually-arriving conclusion expresses itself on her face. "Bolsheviks," she announces. And she has her victory.

I wish this did not happen between us. I wish things were simpler. I am only looking for peace. I slip the note into my robe pocket and leave my hand inside its cavernous privacy. There seems no escape, not here, nor at home where Christopher also exhausts me.

“You left the hotel and where did you go?”

I might as well be in police charge. She’s not going to hear the worst of it, though. Why should she? “And then I came home.”

“Immediately?”

I glance at her. Her eyes are misted. Heaven knows what mood has descended on her. The wise option is to head for my room. “Needless to say,” I continue, rather arched, “I first ensured Katherine’s return to her boarding house. She was, after all, my guest.”

“And I’m correct, am I, that these people are Bolsheviks?” So officious.

“You are, Madeleine. I believe there are agents who watch them and spy on them and so on.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. Well, Isabel! You are getting an education, aren’t you?”

I expect my face betrays me. I would like to throw the buttered toast right at her, hopefully the greasy side. But I don’t want to enflame. I don’t like argument. So I pick up my knife and spread marmalade over the benighted slice instead. It tastes awful.

*Dear Mrs Greene,*

*I am enquiring regarding your safe arrival at your place of residence, or otherwise. It is to be hoped that you had no difficulties. As I feel that I should have accompanied you in the cab despite your protestations, the hour so late, I am desolate.*

*After your departure, our party continued gathered at the Russian eating establishment we pointed out to you, and let me assure you that Katherine was well taken care of, to quote you exactly. As a group, some of us walked from the restaurant to the boarding house and she was seen to her door.*

*It was with regret that I said good-night to you, too early.*

*Your comrade,*

*L.A. Kurakin*

I bend my head to my knees and bury my forehead there out of pure humiliation. The stiff formality of it! The bemusement, the cocked eyebrow at my antics last night, my insisting to the point of tears almost that Katherine and I decline the invitation to dine with them. I'm glad Katherine stood her ground with me, went with them, behaved as any brave woman would. He must think me such a fool.

Yet he walked me back across the bridge. The river was black, apart from oily glints under the light of lanterns. We walked slowly, step by step, until eventually we trod in rhythm with one another and there was only the sound of one footfall. His arm brushed against mine and once my elbow collided with his as we talked in the night that was becoming silent, the town closing its doors, falling asleep. Four hopeful, horse-drawn cabs lined up along the Quay, dimly waiting. As I climbed up into the first, his hand took my weight. He bowed again as he said good-night.

I was giddy as a girl while the cab clopped alongside the river. The air was as warm as his hand had been and beside me the heart-beat lap of water. I've never walked alone in the night with a man before, other than my husband I mean. It was probably very wrong of me. But there's really no need to tell Christopher about it.

## Chapter Four

*I* can't stay away forever. A restful visit with a cousin, what's so questionable about that in these bad times? The train pulled out of Brisbane amid a most frightful clamour, wagons discarded every which way on side tracks, the loading and unloading of goods apparently a cause of rising temperature, men shouting, young cattle bellowing their terror.

Madeleine waved a white handkerchief, perhaps a plea for peace, who knows? She's begged me to come back to her new home frequently, even at the drop of a hat. She just had to put it that way, couldn't resist I suppose. She did cry. I always get upset at partings, too.

The train must have been sitting in the sun, waiting, for quite some time. My leather head-rest is uncomfortably hot. This does not help my headache. I need air, a deep breath of cool mountain air. My corset is a torment. I need to be at peace with myself, close my eyes against the glare, calm the jumble in my mind. If only I had some lavender water. I know I strike a tragic pose, hand on breast, forehead pressed against window.

There is nowhere to go, not here, not there.

The climb begins into the mountains. Already there's clarity in the air, the paddocks stretching out greyly, trees taller, more sure of themselves. Spring is late up here this year. The light, no longer fat and bulbous as it is on the coast, has an edge to it, angled sharply through tree boughs in the late afternoon.

I've slept, I think. Out of desperation. It will be an hour or more till we reach the border and change trains. A mist is rising above the grass, hovering there.

It will be dark and I haven't warned him. I couldn't think of how to frame the telegraph message. Returning home. Or if I'd said, "meet the train", I'd have to look out for him as we pulled in, allow him to help with the luggage, lead me through the station hall, his back stiff with everything I'd done to him. No, I couldn't bear it. But what will I do? Sleep in the station waiting room?

“I’ll carry this inside for you, Mrs Greene.”

Mr Kelly is a faithful cab driver. His retirement from the mail coach has invested him with a domesticity he lacked before, the servant these days of a mere handful of roads.

“I’m all right, Mr Kelly, thank you very much indeed. Mr Greene will help me with it. You’re very kind.”

“Goodnight, so, ma’am,” he says and he’s already gone down the path. The catch of the wooden gate clicks behind him, his footsteps thud on the cold ground.

The key is in the lock but I haven’t turned it. Mr Kelly is delaying, probably watching me, waiting to see me safely inside. The light’s on in the study. He knows I’m here. He must be sitting at his desk, the curtains closed behind him though not completely. He’s left a gap between them, absent-minded, distracted by something. I can just see a small fire leaping in the grate.

It’s Mr Kelly’s insistent patronage that drives me inside. No sooner does the light from the hall lantern spill over me than he signals his horse, drops the reins lightly on her rump, and the clopping starts up again, the jangle of a tiny bell she wears prettily under her throat. The wheels sough on the roadway.

There’s a smell of damp in the house. That is why I insist on polish every week, not just for the gleam which I also love, but for the pungency, the sweetness. Would the world rot if women ceased to care for it?

He’ll come out of that room any moment now. I can feel his awareness through the walls. My new hat is tight on my head, a good fit. I ease it off carefully and gaze with a strange lack of interest at my reflection as I stroke a vagrant tendril of hair back into place. The kerosene lamp on the hall table colours me with a greenish tinge. I hang the hat from a peg and the brim and flow of red ribbons press against the mirror as if there are two hats. How strange. I ease my finger between them and feel only cold glass. So innocent, the cluster of tiny silken flowers, pink and scarlet, pinned to the band.

The door opens. Though I’ve been anticipating the moment, I jump with surprise.

“Why didn’t you notify me?” he says and I almost laugh. Madeleine and he should be the blood relatives.

My fingers are weakened with fatigue, I expect, and they’re slow and clumsy as I unbutton my coat. I look down at them.

Just as abruptly as he appeared, he goes. It's meant to be a slap in the face and it stings. I don't like rough feelings. I follow him into the study.

"If you won't even talk to me ..." he's saying.

"I'm tired, Christopher, that's all. It's been a long day. I'm a bit stupefied with it." I watch his slender back, its movement under the worsted jacket as he pokes at the fire, the iron grinding against the grate. I can see his hurt. But I can't approach it, the years have illustrated that. I sit down quietly in the armchair facing his desk and at last he puts down the poker. "Is it cold enough for a fire?" I say.

He rubs his hands, brushes at the dirt he imagines lingers on his palms and I can see the hardening of his jaw. "It would make more sense if I'd come to pick you up. Why always do things the hard way?"

"Mr Kelly was outside the station, luckily. I just took it into my head to come back, Chris. So I did."

"In much the same way you just took it into your head to go."

I sense all the bewilderment and loneliness of the past three weeks in this unpolished house. The dry stone of my guilt has resided here too. He walks around the desk, bending slightly under the unwieldy imbalance of his height. He sits and does not meet my eyes but I am impaled.

She never comes to our back door. She would do that anywhere else and call through the kitchen doorway, "Anyone home?". Because my house is rather grander than those belonging to most of her acquaintance in the district, she would not demean herself by trailing around the back. She comes only to the front door. Let her see Madeleine's residence, and even more those of my cousin's acquaintance, and she might soften her attitude toward me. I watch her approach through the upstairs window. She's wearing her black felt hat even though I know one of her boys sat on it recently and broke the feather's spine.

That's her ringing on the bell now. I pluck the lace hanky from my bedside table and hurry from the room before Mabel, ironing Christopher's shirts, feels obliged to answer it.

"I'll get it, Mabel," I shout as I come to the landing.

Dimly I hear, "Righto, Mrs Greene."

I hesitate for a moment, caught in the mellow light that floods in through the stained glass window at this hour. If only I could stay in this stolen refraction, yellowed, my eyes not quite closed to the tricks air plays, shifting, winking.

She rings again, her fluidy hands probably twisting awkwardly as she turns the bell-key. She must be anxious to see me.

My own newly-bought hat affronts me as I pass the hallstand, red ribbons dangling thoughtless as a child's braids. When I open the door, I'm greeted with an unconscious sigh as if all the struggles of this woman's life go on in secret and I've caught her unawares. Instantly she changes and her face lights up. "Welcome home," she says to me.

"Mrs Martin, dear," I say as I lean to kiss her. The Irish have skin like rose-petals and my own skin, forgetful, is always taken aback when it brushes her cheek.

"Fran Kelly told me you came in on the train last night. I wasn't expecting you."

"No, well I .... Come in, dear, come in."

"Just had enough of it."

"Oh, yes," I agree casually. We walk past the study door and on to the second reception room where I sit during the day. I touch her arm as a signal to enter. "Well, I saw Katherine."

"Yes?" she says.

"I'll tell you all about it. She's looking very well indeed."

Mrs Martin lays her basket on the floor. Her black leather purse nestles between paper-wrapped grocery parcels. "Happy enough, is she?" she asks, as if it were a matter of mild interest to her.

I open the glass door of the mantel-piece clock, reach under its rosewood body where my finger barely fits, a worm poking about in the dark. I don't know why this part of the ritual always slightly alarms me. I touch the key and draw it forward.

"I think she's happy. She certainly has matured in the few months. Knows her way around Brisbane." The key engages the mechanism and I wind rhythmically. The arrowed hands hover, waiting. I watch them as if they are an enemy of some kind, a certain furious malevolence tensed up in their enforced pause. It's with relief that I withdraw the key, hide it again from myself and gently close over the circular door.

Mrs Martin's hands are joined on her lap, a sign that she has settled. "As long as she's all right up there," she says.



“I really think there’s nothing to worry about, dear. She likes the bit of independence, if you ask me.”

“She was always the same, even as a baby.”

“Yes, I remember her as a tiny little girl wandering away from the house, up and down the street with a stick. I remember she used to love to whack leaves with it, if she could reach up, and run it along a picket fence,” I say.

“Yes, that’s right, she did. The snail trails she used to call them, that she’d make with the stick dragged along behind her. In case she got lost.” There’s a subtle shift of her elbows, as if a grounded bird stilled on a summery day wanted to air its wings. The feather in her old hat’s at right-angles to its quill. The world is pitiless.

“I’ll get us a cup of tea. Mabel’s doing the ironing.”

She turns her head, the feather’s tip pointing like a compass. She should really pluck it out altogether. “There were clouds coming up,” she says, craning her neck to peer upwards out of the window. “Gone, from the looks of it.”

“Oh, it has to rain soon. It can’t go on like this.” I’m saying only what everyone says. I can’t think of one original thing to say about it. Drought is eating us up but the truth is I’m the least afflicted. I don’t count on the grass, nor on a crop of any kind.

“And so you came back,” she says.

“Oh, yes.”

“Are you feeling any better?”

I pull my handkerchief from my waistband and dab at my nose. “Not really.” She’s silent.

“I don’t have much to complain about, do I?” I don’t know how she sits there watching my foolish disintegration. The scale of things is as clear to me as to anyone else. The women with children. They are tormented beyond endurance in these times.

“Oh, well,” she sighs. She sighs a great deal of late. “We each have our cross to bear, Mrs Greene. You’ve had yours, God knows.”

There’s nothing more shaming than weakness. She was the witness while I was at my worst. I didn’t even know her, except to see in the street, before she was called in. The second time it happened she was called again, earlier. Mistaken faith convinced her that perfect stillness, hers as well as mine, would lull the child, persuade it to stay where it was and I believed her. Two days and a night she sat beside my bed. And afterwards, months after, only her knock at the door brought any

flutter of life to me. She understood. Once in my life I cried in front of anyone. But this is different, a wilful unhappiness. There could be no room in her for pity, no matter what she says. I don't want pity. I hate that she pities me for the loss of those two children. We were young women then, we had passions that overflowed. Now I want silence, the dignity of being alone with it, whatever this vague despair is.

I say, "Any word from Paddy?"

"I got a letter yesterday." She leans down to pull the leather purse from her basket. Her pink fingers, so fat with fluid that I can feel the awkwardness of such delicate movement, seem tender to me as she struggles with the clasp. She's developed the habit of carrying around on her person the latest letter she receives and replaces it then with the next. Paddy himself would be embarrassed at this unfamiliar passion. She seems to be playing with it but she doesn't yet take it out.

"Is he still in France?"

She doesn't quite meet my eye. "Where else would they put them? Not much point sitting over in England. They send them up where it's worst."

She's angry. Angry at everyone. I'm afraid of saying something else foolish. But I can't seem to help myself. "Is he all right?" I ask.

She snaps the purse shut, holds the letter on her lap. Her thick thumbs meet, pressed together. "No, he's not all right. He hates it. Bit late now."

"Yes." I walk towards the door. "We could do with a cuppa."

"Katherine's doing good, though," she says, and she needs to be convinced. She's turned on her seat to watch me. She looks pale.

I say, "She has friends there. And her room is nice. Small but she's done it up very nicely. She has a Chinese quilt on the bed."

"Oh, well," she says. "She might as well."

Who knows what she means by that? I won't tell her about the Bolsheviks. It would only worry her.

A savage wind is blowing up. The earth's so dry that dust is rising like ghosts from the roads and the paddocks. It will adhere to the dressing table, the mirror, the chest of drawers. It's like ash.

I'm already too slow, heaving the sash window closed. The cotton curtain drapes over my back and I stare down at the pandemonium below where the dust is a maddened thing, winding around itself.

I may as well go downstairs. The Bible is lying on my bed in a slight disarray of quilt. I still haven't opened it, as I have done every day of my life, and I don't believe I will.

## Chapter Five

*I*t's too late in the year for this relentless grip of winter. The whole Tablelands is whitened with frost and under it the grass lies struggling for life. My hot water bottle had strayed out from the blankets at some ruthless hour of the night and I woke with ankles and calves cold as the dead. God help us, how will we survive all this?

Christopher was on his haunches when I came down the stairs, the bellows in his hands. He has tricks with the fire that he considers unique, taught to him by his blessed mother.

He hears me and turns his head from the trickle of flame he's coaxing along a skinny, naked shank of gum. It's almost obscene. "Mabel's let the range go out, too. Breakfast will be late," he says.

"Oh, well."

He clicks his tongue and returns to the satisfaction of breathing into his carefully constructed bonfire. Do I mean to aggravate him?

"We'll have to get a girl to live-in. Can't have this," he says. His voice is caught by the stone, muffled, sent ringing up the chimney.

"This cold snap isn't Mabel's fault, surely?"

"I don't believe I said it was."

I sigh with subtle drama. Why are we reduced to this?

"I wasn't in any way suggesting we get rid of Mabel," he continues. "But since she can't live-in, a younger girl could be of use to her, as well as prevent ... this sort of thing happening. The worst possible morning for it, when we need heat."

Mabel is making a great show of coming noisily up from the kitchen, warning us of her impending arrival. In this way, among others, she reveals her lack of training, of course. I stand back from the door as she approaches, the heavy tray in her hands.

"Morning," she says to me.

"Terrible morning," I reply.

From her demeanour, I understand that Christopher has already had words with her. Both of us stare at Christopher's back and note his silence. She leans over the pedestal table and, straining, lowers the tray to its polished surface. "That range could do with a service," she says. "Yez should get someone in. It's smoking like the billy-o out there." She looks at nobody as she delivers this blow but rather takes the bundle of cutlery and taps them like sticks against the painted red flowers on the tray as if she's about to deal a hand of cards.

"I'll set the table, Mabel," I say.

"Did you see that in the paper?" she replies. "Some clergyman's daughter down in Sydney, says she's figured out when the war will end. There's codes or something in the Bible."

Christopher says, "She's mad."

Mabel looks quite deliberately at me, her chin up. "Harry's going to do it when he gets home this evening. He didn't have time earlier."

"I must have a look," I say.

"There it is." She gestures to the newspaper Chris must have tossed to the easy chair before he got down on his knees. "Two or three pages in you'll find it. I'd better get back to me bacon. Next thing there'll be more trouble."

He embarrasses me, this rather bumptious approach he takes with lower people. I feel quite ashamed in front of Mabel at times.

His fire is now behaving, a healthy flame shoots through the log pyramid he's cleverly constructed. It is beginning to succumb. He brushes his hands smartly.

"It's just as likely I'll get a new girl trained up and she'll leave, like the last one," I say.

"It's your household, Iz. If you want to run it like this ..." He picks a twig from the knee of his trousers, stares at the tender intruder, stupidly one might think, before tossing it into the blaze.

It takes a few moments for the implied insult to reach me. I feel a fury as cold and pointed as the silverware in my hands, the knives, pronged forks. He has never fought fair, Christopher. Nevertheless I attend to the table-setting, for Mabel's sake as much as anything. I lift the heavy tea-pot from the tray and shove the tiny-legged stand to the centre as tides of hot tea slurp from the china spurt. He watches me. Deliberately, I leave the brown liquid to sizzle on the mahogany until the cutlery is laid down, lined up, straightened, before I dab at the cooling pools with the tea-cloth

Mabel has wisely left on the tray. I cannot bear him this morning. The room has grown too small.

He pulls a chair out from the table, seats himself, walks it in with stuttered bumps. I attack the marmalade with the back of its tiny spoon, flattening it down in the bowl, to neaten the effect I suppose. And Mabel swoops into the middle of all this, a laden plate in each hand. She says, "The other thing is, there were more eclipses last year than ever before. Seven or eight of them." The eggs slide precariously close to the plates' edge. The bacon is still bubbling.

"And what is that supposed to prove, Mabel?" he asks. In years gone by, I'd have kicked him under the table. He is, thankfully, overly engaged in enjoying the sight of his breakfast.

Mabel gathers her apron skirt and cleans her hands of grease. She's been caught on the hoof by his question, or perhaps the manner of it. "Prove? Well. It's all an indication, isn't it?"

"Very strange," I agree.

"A better indication," he says, and his knife and fork are upright in his two fists now, "would've been conscription. That would end the war smartly. However..." He slices into a sausage. "The people have spoken. Wrongly, in my view."

The apron rises to cover her face and she wipes at her forehead, the sides of her nose. "That's not what the boys want either," she says.

"I beg to differ. Those fighting know the score, not the radical press and all these union fellows and the rest."

"It says in the paper than Lance Corporal Noonan wrote home to his father about it, and they didn't want it after all."

I shake salt on my egg. It is perfectly membraned with white skin, the promise of running yellow yolk just under it. I would wish the conversation to cease. Mabel is standing her ground, solid, wide-hipped and under that demeanour she's upset.

"I don't wish to disparage Mr Noonan," Christopher ploughs on, the sausage meat pummelled by his molars, "but I very much doubt young Roddy Noonan knows what he's talking about."

Against my own will, I find myself saying, "I thought that was the point you were making, weren't you? The boys would know best?" My hand has begun to shake, the fork with its trophy of egg chattering a sudden alarm against the china plate. I always expect retribution.

He says nothing. Mabel leans between us and lifts the teapot. I quickly reach for the silver strainer from its bowl and settle it over my cup. The tea pours in a practised stream, dark golden against the fragile white porcelain. He and I wait as she moves the pot across to his cup, replaces the strainer. The tea is already darker.

“Do you have enough to eat?” she asks.

“Thank you,” he says. At last.

She nods to herself. I watch her out of puppy-dog eyes. I’m obsequious to the point of nausea. I butter a slice of toast noisily, clatter the bread knife against the plate too.

She’s gone before I look at Christopher, who is saying in a low voice, “You could support me in front of the servants.”

He’s right, of course.

## Chapter Six

*M*r Samson is behind the bar this afternoon. His white apron is more the colour of marsh water, unless it's my eyes in this darkness. As he turns to pick up a glass from the shelves behind him, a trick of light bounces through the shaded window and sparks on the mirror and his left side is completely lit up. My mind plays tricks, too. It occurs to my silly imagination that his angel hovers so close I can see a shimmering garment. A current of rainbow colours shoots along his raised arm. He looks up as I hover in the hall entrance and I'm not sure who I'm seeing.

Then his voice says, "G'day, Mrs Greene. Cold enough for ya, last night?"

In the shadows I can make out four other faces, two men drinking quietly together at the end of the scrubbed bar, two others at separate tables. It seems so lonely. They each raise their eyes to gaze at me, a brief novelty.

"Terrible frost, Mr Samson, wasn't it?" I say agreeably though I thought the frost beautiful this morning, our browned grass stiff with it, turned white overnight, and white all over the valley, hanging icily from trees.

"Terrible. I don't know what this weather's trying to tell us. You looking for Mrs Martin? She's upstairs, I believe."

"I wouldn't like to disturb her," I say, aware of an employer's obligation to defend his hours.

"You go on up. She's off later on this afternoon, anyway. How's Mr Greene?" He polishes the glass with his cloth. It, too, shafts light across the room as he turns it, the way they say lost men do in the bush, flashing shards of broken mirrors, shirt-rubbed, or the lids prised off cans of food.

"My husband's very well, thank you, Mr Samson."

"Very good," he says. He holds the glass under the cask tap and stares at it. I watch his thumb and finger slowly twist the tap open. He gives me one more quick look, unsure of himself apparently. I've made him nervous. I turn quietly and leave them to it.



Hotels are such empty places during the day, kitchen quiet, stairways leading up to further silence, the bedroom doors open to the air. It is only since Norah Martin's forced encampment here with her two boys almost a year ago that I've become a familiar with such knowledge. She had spotted me a few moments ago as I wandered hopefully along the road, but not before a bright shower of dust had cascaded down from the verandah, her broom brushing, brushing. "Did I get you? Come on up," she'd yelled, her hand on her hip, the broom stilled, standing beside her like the relic of a man.

She's waiting for me now on the threshold of her room.

At the end of the corridor, behind her, is a large window. Through it, the early afternoon sun flings a light masquerading as warmth. It floods one wall, brightens it dazzlingly, but the opposite wall is in shadow, and a shadow of the window's cross-frame lurches just over Mrs Martin's shoulder. I'm slowed by the sight of her, I don't know why. She waits and doesn't move.

She suddenly livens, brushes her hands down her apron skirt. Her voice is clear as it reaches me. "We'll go down to the kitchen later. I've got another letter from Paddy."

The leather of her shoes slides against the painted floor and she moves into the room. My steps are muffled by the runner rug, faded reds, dulled greens, brushed to thinness.

The curtain she has strung across the room, shielding her woman's privacy from the embarrassment of her awkwardly burgeoning boys, is drawn back tidily and tucked behind the bedpost. Mr Samson has been good to her. He and the boys carried a second bed into the room a few months ago and a set of drawers for her belongings, remnants of when things weren't so bad, linens, embroideries, part of a set of green-etched crockery. Her knives and forks are in a top drawer where normally would be handkerchiefs or undergarments. Out the back in the stables, he's stacked her furniture. Everything will be needed again when life improves.

She lifts the pillow from her bed. Her nightgown is bundled in a sort of neatness. Folded beside it, laid straight and square on the almost-fresh sheet, is the precious letter.

There is nowhere else I can come, not any more. She's a waterhole in a thirsty land. She held me once as I cried silently and rocked in my bed, knees up, her arm around

me, my head on her shoulder. Yet I wouldn't dare to force my sympathies on her. It's hard to tell who's to blame for that. I can see the ravaging that betrayal has played on her. I've watched it take the remains of her youth away. The life she breathed into my own ear years ago has dried up inside her, I know that.

And now her children. Katherine sent out to make her way in the world and the eldest girl, Mary, half-way up the track to Brisbane and alone with a babe while her young husband fights overseas. The two youngest, Ted and Frank, kept safe by force of her anxious will, flame-cheeked and shaking with nerves at conscription rallies, shouting out her piece, her absolute refusal to pack off another son. And most of all, Paddy.

She sits down on the bed as if I'm forgotten, unfolds the sheets of paper. The springs quiver.

When I come outside, step from beneath the lacy overhang of the hotel balcony, the light is so bright it hurts my eyes. There is that sly wind nevertheless, attacking ankles, bare necks. Where will I go now? Even the tea rooms will be closed.

Beyond the creek is the unending west where in the old days the boys used to disappear off to the droving of cattle from one water-hole to another. Or the tending of sheep, oily and sweet, thousands upon thousands, heavy-coated and tired under that relentless globe out there. But, oh, how I envied those boys, riding off at dawn, away from their mothers, their wives. And when they came back, weeks, months later they were burned brown, tougher, silenced.

The willows are wild in this wind, heaving and tangling. I ease out a hat pin as I walk into a gust of it, poke it securely back in through the give of the felt. One mighty gush billows my skirt up to my knees, and I am all black stockings and boots and whites of petticoat frills and the embarrassment of my own hands scuffling with it all. The trees are also distressed, shaking and bowing. Leaves chink against each other.

I have arrived at the bridge. The wind suddenly drops and it's quieter. I let fall the gather of skirt I've been grasping all the way down the road. The thud of my boots is too loud now without the racket, an extravagance on the wooden walkway. A web of struts and posts respond to my thoughtless presence with pressures of their own, creaks and tremors and the excited echo from the hollow beneath us.

The creek is a horror, worse than before. Willow fronds trail in mud. Poor pools along the bed, barely enough for a couple of horses to slake their thirst. What are we going to do? The railing is splintered under my hand, where I have leaned a thousand times over the years to watch the delightful goings-on of moving water.

Years ago I had plucked a fruit from Mrs Martin's garden when she had one. As I'd walked down her path, I tore it open. The seeded redness of its insides was more than itself that day. I said to myself, it's the split of a pomegranate, this creek to our valley. Moist, luscious, the cut that spills blooded life over everything. And I'd walked on down towards the creek in a morning of the loveliness I was only beginning to see again. The eruption of the mountain lay ahead – people say such shapes are feminine in form, but perhaps I couldn't bear such a fecund thought, not then. I felt from it instead a strength, a primitive protection. The whole world glistened, the dewy grass and spring leaves, puffs of white cloud alive with light. I held the split fruit in my hand, untasted, as I approached the creek, the decline of the valley. The waters were full and clean. Mountainy waters.

A stick insect is motionless over a dirtied pool, watching I suppose. He's alone, stranded out here, as desperate as every other animal. I hope he doesn't sting. Are his wings beating so fast that my eye can't see? I don't know the hows of so many things. If it doesn't rain soon, we're lost. I wish I hadn't seen this. It scares me.

The echo under my feet is more hollow than it used to be. Ahead of me, telegraph poles line the rail tracks. I'm sure I see a flag of smoke coming up from the south. The train will take only a minute or two to reach the station. That is where I'll go.

It will be quicker to cut through the paddock. It's empty today. I wonder what Cedric Lytton has done with his bullocks? There are splinters on this fence, too. My jacket has caught. I ease the material back and forward till I'm released and I slip through. It's simpler to clamber under than walk all the way to the gate. The grass is sharp and brown and the cow pats are dried up.

The whistle screams in the distance. I hurry like a child.

The door into the ladies' room on the platform is half-open. As I stand at the mirror picking tiny remnants of the fence from my jacket, the door pushes further in and another traveller enters. She's foreign. There are five passengers in here already – waiting for the cubicles to become vacant, sitting for warmth by the fire. In the mirror

I see them glance at her. One is an aged lady, a black widow, her veil folded back over her hat in the refuge of this waiting room. Or maybe not a widow, not these days, a son maybe, grandsons. She's pinch-faced, unwelcoming of the stranger. I could slap her. She turns to her neighbour, a woman my own age, blowsy, desperate to agree, and the widow, silly thing, arches a brow to emphasise her unspoken point. The two younger ones, fair-haired girls, sisters perhaps, stare at the foreigner with unfeigned curiosity.

She wears a scarf low on her forehead, tied inelegantly under her chin. Her skirt is ugly in its disregard of flattery, striped as men's pyjamas, the hem failing to create a straight line at her calves and below it white stockings gather in folds at her ankles. The jacket, approaching white, is square-cut and unappealing and makes her appear thick rather than shapely, which she might well be under it all. Her face has a pasty hue, the skin around her eyes fluidy and puffed. She's Russian, I would swear, but whereas some have the high cheekbones and almond eyes that remind one of dangerous birds, others of the race are like the ploughed earth itself. They are hardly like us, any of them.

She stands against the wall, leans back, resting. The tongue and groove has been recently painted cardinal red, some quirk of the station-master's. She catches me examining her in the glass. Her eyes, wider open now, reveal an exotic narrowing at their tips. Her gaze is long and silent. I cannot but meet it, stare at her in the gilded mirror. I straighten the frilled collar of my green blouse, tug at the jacket's hem before I turn for the door. Her gaze drops to the floor. The black widow pushes her blowsy neighbour further up the bench away from the standing stranger and ostentatiously heaves her portmanteau up on the seat beside her, blocking encroachment. If the Russian reeks of the dirt of travel, I don't smell it. Perhaps the widow smells the odour of foreignness.

Outside, the station is agog. The gassy vapours whiten the air above the steam engine, wail with the wind along the train's roof and form clouds about the wheels. Almost every compartment door is open. The travellers north are stretching their legs and taking cognisance of this country town. It's a marvellous thing to drink in fresh sights.

The station-master is impaled against his own doorpost, also freshly painted red, by a gentleman of voluble inclination. The visitor is a Sydney-ite from the looks of him, his suit rather neat and savvy, watch-chain crossed in a perfect arc across his

middle and his boater hat tipped so far back on his head that one stares at it with trepidation. He must be older than he looks, perhaps, since he's not in uniform. Perhaps he is forty after all. What is he enquiring about, the timetable, the historical points of interest in the area? Or is he commenting upon the weather and its obstinacy, the war in France, revolution in Russia?

War has caused a breach in our world. And through the breach, the whole world has tumbled down to us here. It's as if we're alive where before we were dead. It's a terrible thing to say but I don't know how will we ever go back, back to the closing of this fissure, back to the lives we knew, the life of "as today, so tomorrow". This is how shameful I am. No son or husband in it. Like a greedy woman ravenous for the leg of chicken or the first sugar-crunched serving of bread and butter pudding. I'm a piece of work, all right.

Mr Stoppard eases sideways from the Sydney man who is loathe to cease the lopsided dialogue. The get-away is made good and the station-master walks at a trot up the platform towards the engine where the driver has just climbed on board.

The Sydney man undergoes a transformation, silenced into an embarrassed awkwardness as if he doesn't know how to bear himself, stranded alone on this railway station high up on the cool tablelands of the North. He takes off the precarious boater, mercifully, and fans it in front of his face though why exactly he'd do that in such a bitter wind is beyond figuring. He's red-faced as if from some sort of exertion. Could it be that he's attempted to enlist and been failed, is that it, and suffers now from a lack of potency? Or has he held out for reasons of conscience or cynicism and suffers, all the same, from some sort of lack? Poor man. He swallows, and swallows again, his mouth working as if it can't dislodge some impediment. Anxious, beneath the hale-heartedness. Dear God, we're a sorry lot.

The whistle shrieks and we're all startled, as we're meant to be. Skirts whip as women wheel towards their compartments. The ladies' room dispels its panicked brood, one after another, hats being adjusted as each emerges, gloves eased on. The Russian has yet to emerge. Doors are slammed, windows opened or shut depending on notions of comfort and eventually only one man is left standing, waiting, the white smoke rising, teasing about the underbelly. The axles start their slow, laboured rotations. He's her husband, I'd safely say. He dresses in Australian garb, or an approximation of it, pale calico trousers, a dark jacket too short for him, shirt tucked into the waistband in an un-Russian fashion. In this way, I suppose, he hopes to blend

with his fellows, to appear insignificant, not worthy of blame or censure. But he's undeniably foreign, when I look close at him. He doesn't shift his gaze from the Ladies' Room door and quite admirably refuses to look down the platform to where the station-master and the driver are impatient for him to move. I, too, become nervous of her punctuality. What if the train were to leave without them, steam northward in voluptuous puffs of righteousness?

Here she comes, however, her eyes down. She was last in, I know what it's like. Terrible to leave without the required relief. She walks quickly to him and wordlessly he lays his hand on the small of her back as she climbs up. He climbs in after her and slams the door and immediately the station-master raises his flag as if a race has been won. The whole train jerks backwards and shudders.

I wonder what side they are on, those two? Are they revolutionaries, exiled for years as the ferment grew, longing to go home? Or Whites escaped only of late from the turmoil of the long-awaited moment? They are all here now, so I'm told. The train creates rolling thunder, hisses of hot steam as it chugs out of the station away north to Brisbane. Who will meet it there? A crowd of Bolsheviks clustering under the eaves of the platform, waiting, eyeing suspicious strangers who also wait but who lean too nonchalantly against white-painted posts?

Mr Stoppard rolls his flag up as he wanders slowly back to his offices. Guiltily, I see him catch sight of me. Why can't he presume I was here to goodbye a friend? How would he have noticed one way or the other, for goodness' sake, in the smoky pandemonium of the ten-minute stop?

I hardly know what I'm doing here myself. Bored, longing for something up the line? I'm as bad as the local louts, little kids, who hide behind the horse trough and hurl stones at the train's roof as it steams out of town. I hope he doesn't mention my unmerited presence to Myra. Myra Stoppard thinks she owns this railway station and everything in it and she's not averse to developing passing enmities either, whomever in the district she considers even briefly outside the Pale. She'd probably say I was going strange.

"You looking for a parcel, Mrs Greene?" His voice carries down to me.

Foolishly I look over my shoulder to the trolley half-full with boxes and paper packages, a leather pouch bulging with letters. It would be pointless to careen down that path, which would entail a detailed and futile search, both of us examining the varied scripts, fine and italic or very nearly illegible.

“No, Mr Stoppard,” I say. “Just seeing someone off, that’s all.”

He stares, unbelieving perhaps. Which of our own people would have got on the train whom he couldn’t account for?

“Will it ever rain?” I say.

“I saw a hawk overhead earlier. Big chap. Thought it might be that blighter that took the dog. Did you hear about that, Mrs Greene? Six foot from tip to tip. Swept right in and nabbed the poor bloody pup.”

We walk companionably now, crunching pebbles underfoot until we pass in through the double doorway to the silent grandeur of the hall. This is his domain.

“Poor thing,” I say.

“It’s a bad omen, is what it is.” He leans down to the floor with some effort, his paunch causing resistance, scoops up a discarded coupon of some sort and sighs himself straight again. “I should write to the paper that I saw it here. Right overhead he was, black as night in the sun.”

“You should write in,” I agree.

We reach the door of his personal suite and he stands there, buttoned tightly into his blue uniform, master’s hat peaked on his head. He’s drawn between the deep pleasure of his official business and the need for conversation. He looks around, surveying. The floor is polished to a burnish though over it now lie the scattered footprints of restless boots and waist-like shapes of ladies’ shoes.

Then he says, “Did you hear about this carry-on up at Brisbane? Quite a levee, evidently, at the station. The Premier himself down there, Ryan. And all his cronies. There was a big write-up about it in the paper.”

There seems to be so much these days. A levee at Brisbane railway station, the Queensland Premier? I don’t seem to recall anything about it. Anyway, the image of clustering Bolsheviks, isolated at the end of the platform, invades my thinking and I can’t tear it out. “Did I see that?” I say.

“Of course I heard about it first-hand, with my job,” he says.

“Oh, yes,” I say, expressing, I hope, what he wants to hear.

“Yes, the Brisbane boys let me know immediately about the whole performance. It seems the Labour fellows from all over the country had been up there for their annual congress, and Ryan and his boys went down to the station to wave goodbye to the mob from Perth. The carry-on would’ve beat the band, oh yes, Mrs Greene, and they showed their true colours, I can tell you. I don’t have to tell you

what they were singing. Keep the Red Flag Flying, yes, no qualms at all. And this one bloke leans his head out his carriage window and shouts, 'Three cheers for the Revolution', and up they go, hooting and clapping, the whole blinking lot of them. Now that's the truth out in the open, if ever I heard it. That's loyalty for you." He nods to himself, expecting me to do the same.

In spite of my native propensities I can't quite play along, heaven knows why. "I'm sure they didn't mean it, Mr Stoppard. You know, people say things."

"They meant it, all right, oh dear, don't you worry. That red Premier they've got up there, he wants a dose of revolution himself, see how he likes it. Why doesn't he go over and live in Russia himself, if he's so keen on it? Leave us out of it."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, anyway." I feel a strong desire to inform the station-master of my night spent among Bolsheviks, the heaving river alongside, stars almost melting with heat. Of all people to tell, when I've told no-one, why the station-master?

He saves me, thankfully, from indiscretion. "Wait till the war's over, that's what I say, and our boys come home. Then we'll see what happens to these reds and all these foreigners." He tucks his furled white flag under his arm in a rather trim and military fashion. He holds the discarded and foot-printed coupon between his thumb and finger. "Well, duty calls, Mrs Greene. Give my regards to your husband." He turns the brass door handle. Myra Stoppard does the brasses here every week. A mighty job to be frank, between all the bits and pieces of this well-used station.

"Good-day to you, Mr Stoppard," I say and walk away towards the bright sunlight. On the roadway outside, two wagons piled high with swaying hay are trundling by. The drivers are the two men who were sitting at the hotel bar earlier. That is who they are, up from the coast probably, heading west with this cargo of food for the cattle and sheep, poor creatures, struggling for their lives in the dusty paddocks, bleating as they gather around dry water holes.

At least I managed to keep silent. I so nearly spilled the beans about the Russians, about Lev Kurakin, as though I had a hot stone in my stomach demanding passage through my gorge in order to tumble out of my mouth. This is what happens when you keep things to yourself. But I only keep silence to shield Katherine from her mother's concern. I know what Norah Martin is like. She might be a Labourite but she'd draw the line at Russian atheists and all their free love business.



## Chapter Seven

**I** knew there'd be trouble. The two Martin boys must have joined the recruiting parade after it passed the Railway Hotel. They were probably hiding out in a paddock. The youngsters all seem to spend a great deal of time on their stomachs these days, lying in ditches and the hollows of the land, behind burned out logs, thumbing down imagined triggers, holding sticks up to shoulders firing at one another. What the joy is in being one of the dead, reeling in a faint, clutching at imagined wounds, I don't know. If it were me I'd rather win, I'm sure.

On the other hand Ted and Frank might easily have been skulking behind the Roman chapel, out of their mother's eye line if she'd been watching from the hotel balcony. More than likely that's what happened. They must have raced out as the band paraded up the road from the station and bundled themselves into the middle ranks. A straggly enough rank, at this late stage of the day. They've got most of our boys over there already.

Norah Martin got wind of it, anyhow. Ted is still shorter than she is. How he thought he'd kid them into enlisting him, God only knows. Frank, however, is another kettle of fish. That could have been dangerous.

I'm embarrassed for her. I can hear the mutterings around me from the on-lookers, not just from women but the men too. I wish the whole world didn't have to watch the Martins' antics. Is it a racial question? Their whole lives seem to be a drama. Here we are, the rest of us lined up on the street, watching yet another one. It can be tedious, to be frank.

Young Ted is almost in tears. The Boy Scouts at the head of the parade are entertained beyond decency. The whole march has stopped, including the band. Except for the trombonist who continues hooting, regardless, though he's turned around to watch, his cheeks blowing into bulbous balloons, his eyebrows hopping.

The new arrivals in town, the recruiting officers, are in a quandary. Should they march back down to the side-show the mother and two boys are putting on or ignore it and continue about their business? The local committee are parleying with

the officers and I can imagine what our gentlemen are saying, though none of us can hear with Rupert Wilson's infernal horn honking away without benefit of tune or any semblance of rhythm.

In the end the three visitors and two committee members move en masse into the fray. Norah Martin has Ted's slender wrist in a lock, her strength apparently considerable. Frank is trying to evade her, dodging behind the Callaghan boy who I'd think is just about the right age. She must know she isn't able to man-handle both her sons yet she dodges back and forth too, dragging the other poor youngster behind her like an intransigent dog.

Beside me, the acidic murmuring has turned to laughter. "Uh-oh," one of them says, "Now they're in for it." I don't want to turn my head to the others for fear of betraying her, catching an eye by mistake. But I recognise the voice. That was Fred, probably still girded in his bloodied butcher's apron. He's quite correct in his warning. Mrs Martin, seeing the approach of the official party, ceases her mad dance and faces them square on. Even the trombone has fallen silent. I can hear her breathing. Ted tries to hide behind his mother out of sheer embarrassment. But she will not let him go. Her hand rings his wrist, her arm wrenched around her back. We all wait.

Her voice is clear. "You can march yourselves down to the train and go back to where you came from."

The officers are red-faced above their khaki, probably over-heated inside the winter uniforms. We can hear their boots on the tiny pebbles. They don't seem keen to engage her. They slow up sufficiently to allow our valiant committee the lead. Stinker Jones is on for the fight. That little Welshman, his hair thickly curled right down to his eyelashes, has revealed himself of late as the most patriotic man in the district. He always speaks in a near whisper, his tone no match for the ferocity of his temperament. He's the one who attacks.

He stabs his finger at her. "You, madam," he whispers, and we all lean forward, "are addressing people of importance. Men of our glorious imperial forces." He puffs the *p*'s of his words. I can see only his profile, his tiny red mouth amid its hairy frontiers purring and blowing. He rumbles somehow when he's in a mood like this, rumbles in the back of his throat, down in his chest.

Norah Martin is not one to easily keep herself in check, either. It's probably a god-send that she is imprisoned by her own capture of Ted. I couldn't vouch for

Stinker Jones's safety, apart from it. He, uncannily resembling her stance, is chin up, baiting her almost. Should I do something? Go over to her?

She gets the strength from somewhere. "These two are under age. And you know it, Mr Jones. I could write to Canberra about that. You're breaking the law."

That has flummoxed him. He looks sharply over his shoulder at the recruiting officers. Abashed, he is. "I didn't see them. Did you see them, Ced?"

Behind me I hear the butcher's voice again, very low. "He's putting it on to Ced Hardwicke." The crowd have re-aligned themselves. You can sense the swing quite palpably. She has been very much on her own till now. I am no friend.

The five men go into pow-wow again. Ced's is the loudest voice, claiming his ignorance of the Martin boys' arrival into the parade. "They must'a snuk on," he's explaining to the officer. He turns to the boy scout troop, a disjointed gang swarming into a hive on the side of the road so not to miss anything. "Any of youse boys see these chaps get on the line?"

What a useless discussion, truly. The scouts are incapacitated, speechless with the shyness of their young age. Anyway they're unlikely to give a bad report of the two Martins whom they no doubt see as striking some kind of heroic pose.

Failing to find yet another quarter to shoulder the blame, the two committee members glance at each other, Ced too tall to achieve much in the way of invisibility, Stinker having put himself in the firing line in the first place. It's Norah who saves them.

"I'm taking these two home," she says. "You'll not get another one of mine." And at that, Frank dissolves out of the ranks and walks slowly back to where he can wait for her at the corner. The Callaghan boy is uncomfortable, isolated now. There are only two other men of age who've joined the parade since it moved out from the railway station and they are strangers to us, shearers perhaps or drovers who can't get work now that the animals are dying. The Callaghan boy worries me. He looks lost. Couldn't he just fade away from the rank, as Frankie did, pretend to himself he wasn't there at all?

Norah Martin's skirt is trailing in the dust, tinged white at the hem. She has released Ted who moves away from her. They walk up the road a good six feet apart. He kicks at the dirt and a cloud of it rises up to his knees. I watch them and so does Tommy Callaghan.

The band has started up. The drummer strikes a hollow thump and then concentrates his stick into an ascending roll. Like magic, we are drawn to listen to its heartbeat. The trombone rises and its slide catches a sharp glance of the winter sun. Tommy faces front again, the scouts run up to their place at the head and the official party marches off beside them. There's an absurdity in the difference of height between the committee members, the twelve inches that separate them as they tag along behind the three smart-stepping officers. The day has been ruined for them. Apart from anything, who is left to round up?

Fred's eyes meet mine as he's about to go inside his butcher's shop, where his own footprints await him in the sawdust which he scatters fresh every morning. There is no humour in his face or in his eyes now. He shrugs.

If I don't go after Mrs Martin now, I will have let her down in a most radical way. Strange how, out of the blue, such a moment of truth comes.

I'll buy cakes, enough for the four of us.

The Martins' is the only closed door on the hallway. The other rooms are clean and silent, waiting for guests to arrive off the train or from along the road heading towards the lowlands of the coast. It seems right to walk quietly down such an expectant hallway.

I scratch a tattoo on the door. My nails are over-long. I must cut them. I am about to call her name when I hear Ted's wailing voice rising up. It's not fair, he says. Out of politeness, I tap louder to alert the conversationalists that they're overheard. Footsteps come towards me.

She looks truly dreadful, the pinned bundle of her hair sliding further to the left over her ear even as I gaze. I don't believe she's washed today. She must have run from the hotel on the heels of her sons without a second thought to appearance. Up close I see yellowed grit at her eyes and there may be a tiny crumb of toast on the hair above her lip. She's not pleased to see me.

I hold up my bag of butterfly cakes. I feel rather awkward.

Since there's nothing else either of us can do at this juncture except for her to stand aside and me to walk in, she surrenders. I hear her sigh as I pass close by her. The bay rum she rubs into her scalp is pungent. She always smells warm, Norah Martin, like the insides of an aromatic tree.

Frankie eyes me. Overnight he's grown old enough to show the same impatience at women's triflings that others of his sex display. Perhaps he was always like that and I didn't notice. He shakes his head at the ghastly wallpaper as if to say: this interfering woman, here she is again. I could slap him. Teddy is opening the French doors to the balcony, intent on escape, and that I understand. No boy likes to be discovered, other than by his mother, snivelling and wet-eyed and reduced to the croakiness of a frog. Poor baby, on the cusp of his manhood.

Behind me she says, "Don't! It's too cold. Close it over."

"I only want to stand out here," he croaks. The breeze is chilled. For a moment I see the mountain, framed by the doorway. I long for beauty. The sight, the etched perfection of its rise against the cold, blue sky, lopsided and lacking the boredom of symmetry, eases me, restores me to my soul.

"Close it," she says again, and he shuts the two doors unhappily. The lace curtains rob me of my moment's delight. I feel a fiery opposition. Such a simple thing, surely, to gaze at a mountain? I wish the Martins would refrain from littering their tempers and their tragedies all over the place. Or all over me, at any rate.

Ted's seen the bag in my hand and he's distracted by it. "Cream cake," I say. He nods like a little boy, staring at the grease stain oozing on to the brown paper. He's made me aware of it and I dangle the bag in front of my face to study its potential damage. As I lean my head to the side for this examination, I catch a glimpse of two black shoes, a grey skirt.

I turn around to see Katherine sitting on her mother's bed, the curtain held back by cloth ropes tied to the bed-head. Her hat's still on her head.

"Hello, Mrs Greene," she says.

I'm so surprised and so peculiarly thrilled at this unexpected intrusion, a collision of worlds one might say, that I seem to be grinning from ear to ear. Then slowly, the penny drops. She, too, has been crying.

"Katherine," I say.

Nothing is as one perceives. Norah, in subdued obedience to the inevitable, walks to the bureau where a framed photograph of all five children, three boys standing, two girls seated decorously, is arranged at an angle of importance. Her hair-brush rests upturned in front of it, a tangle of silver and dark hair nesting among its bristles. She takes up a yellowed slip of paper. I recognise it immediately, of course. But I can't believe it. She comes towards me, holding it out.

My heart feels as if it's flopped over, like a trout caught up in a whitewash of brimming water and thrown against a rock.

She says, "Not dead."

## Chapter Eight

I have been staring at the cards in my hand for a good two minutes and I haven't seen a thing, not a club nor a spade. How stupid I am, that I fail to see what's happening all around me. She'd said, "Not dead", while she handed me the telegram as a way to recast events, as a way to relieve that moment of unlivable dread after the postmaster had arrived at the hotel yesterday morning. She must have been working in the kitchen, cooking the guests' breakfast, when he walked through and pulled the envelope from his satchel. The world surely stopped spinning for her. Knowing Larry, he probably stayed standing there till she'd ripped it open and searched for the words on the paper. Barely made sense of them, barely saw them. I hope he was kind to her. It must be hard for him, too.

She was protecting me, saying the words before I had to bend my head and read, my heart stilled in my breast. Protecting me because she hadn't been able to protect herself. I didn't understand the gesture till this very second. And those silly little butterfly cakes, the greasy bag clutched in my hand.

Mrs Fanshawe's cake-sweetened breath is on my cheek. I shift my gaze from my hand of cards and see her eyes, yellowed in a distressing kind of way.

"Miles away," I murmur to her, and she trembles a smile. I didn't realise her eyes were yellowed. She's aged considerably. Her breath is shallow in her chest, and comes in little spurts from her opened mouth. Why does she continue to stare at me like that, poor old thing? I gaze at my hand again. I have an ace of clubs and a four of clubs. Will I pluck out the ace and nestle it next to its mate, or transfer the four neatly in beside my ace? Raising first this one above the tight fan of my hand, poking it back down, and then doing the same to the other is not coming up with a solution.

"Take all night, Mrs Greene," Lucas Saunders says.

"Sorry, Mr Saunders." I have no idea what to play. The lone heart, perhaps. Surely I won't get another, or not one big enough to make the difference.

As I throw it down, Katherine Martin materialises out of the shadows of the library. Has she been standing there for long? I look up at her, waiting for her to greet me. What can she want? Am I to go down to her mother? Or does she have a private word for me alone? I watch her hurried procession through the maze of card tables.

She comes to a halt. But not at my shoulder. She doesn't acknowledge my presence in the slightest. It is Lucas Saunders she wishes good-evening. Lucas stares up at her as if he's never seen her before in all his life. She's growing to be quite beautiful, dark haired, milky-skinned. She has her father's eyes, blue as the far ocean. Underneath the new electric light bulb, its strange and undiffused light, she's paler even than usual. That could be grief or the exhaustion of anxiety.

"It's about the advertisement you put in the paper today," she's saying to him.

He also looks excessively worried and his nose has started twitching up and down, ridiculously, causing his spectacles to slide further along its length. If he weren't such a smart alec, he'd be the local figure of fun. Another clarity I failed to achieve till this second.

"Ad - vertizement?" he enquires, as puzzled as if he's received warning that a doppel-ganger is going about in his stead, materialising at the front desk of the newspaper office with written notes in its hand and demanding publication.

"I went to your place and your housekeeper said you were at the card-game down at the School of Arts. So I need to ask you if we could have it. The ad said it was for a reasonable rent."

The whole room is electrified now. Even the subtlest shift in circumstance, the renting of accommodation, is welcome stimulation around here. There'll be discussion in shops and at gate-posts tomorrow.

Lucas is blushing. His shirt collar is stiffly starched and as white as a fall of snow. His neck has reddened revealingly against it. Seated between us, Mrs Fanshawe inhabits the drama as truly as the third character in a play. I gaze at her with an amazement which I know to be cynically feigned, at the refreshed brightness of her eye, at her lips forming shapes as if she speaks unheard words. I'm washed with revulsion at the bleed of tiny lines around that mad, old mouth and at some essential poverty she so glaringly reveals. She holds her hand of cards so tightly they begin to bend.

"It's because my brother's coming home," Katherine says and the mood turns on a penny. The audience is gape-mouthed, sober-hearted. She finally casts a look at



me as if to she wants to engage my shared knowledge. But in fact Paddy's imminent return is news to me. There was nothing of that. Has there been another telegram, worse even? But still alive, that's the thing to hang on to.

"I saw the piece in the paper this morning about his being injured," Lucas is saying. "That's a mighty blow for your mother, Miss Martin."

Mrs Fanshawe's voice breaks out at last. "I'm sure we all offer our best wishes, dear, oh yes, we certainly do." So that is what the poor old thing was trying to intrude into the conversation.

The whole room is speaking, a wave of sound fermenting around me. I have to lean across Mrs Fanshawe to hear Katherine say over the *melée*, "We got a second telegram this afternoon. He's being shipped over to England after his operation and then he's coming home. He was badly injured, in the stomach." She gazes around now, the messenger surveying the interest she has gathered, a certain humility in acceptance of her sudden rise in status to the One who knows.

The wind has scowled down the chimney and the fire responds with a leap. A log seems to have toppled and a cascade of starry sparks shoots off. We can't help but look over to the hearth, the heavy-wooded mantel. Even Katherine looks. We are all portents and omens these days. I gaze back at her, at the play of red reflected on her skin. Lucas places two fingers on her forearm and withdraws them quickly. In a low voice, while interest is distracted, he says, "If you'd say to your mother about the flag. She'll have to promise she won't put out that flag. It's illegal, does she realise?"

Katherine looks down to the floor and for some reason I do, too. My shoe scrapes back and forth over the bees-waxed boards. They are quite smooth.

"All right," I hear her say.

The whole world might be ablaze but tempers will flare at the unbalancing of numbers in a card party. Lucas Saunders returned his interest to the game even as Katherine exited through the darkened doorway. Apparently the interlude had threatened a necessity allied with the clock. It all seems so clear to me, suddenly. For Lucas, our little gathering is held safely in place by a certain allotted time, a cork plug to stave off the leaking of the known universe into some kind of impossible chaos. When I stood up and said I had to leave, he threw his cards dramatically to the table. Face down, so no one could see what he had. Mrs Fanshawe was very nearly in tears as she looked up me, biting her lip. She's terrified of him. Of everybody, come to that.

Anyway, I can't worry about it just now. I hurry down the steps. The night is overcast, few stars, a moon revealing itself only by the toe of its slipper. Under the glimmer of the new street light, Katherine's shape is sharp as day and casts her shadow as long as late afternoon's. She moves so fast that she has passed right through its bright pool and soon fades like a flitting moth. Even her footsteps have fallen silent. I hear the strain of my own breathing. I don't want to shout for fear of waking sleeping souls at this hour. I fall through the light, too, and my shoe soles embarrass me with their tattoo on the empty roadway.

She stops and slowly turns around as I puff up to her. My youth has flitted and faded, it seems.

I take her wrist and struggle to calm my breath to say, "I just wanted to see if everything's all right. You heard from them again, did you?"

Her arm jerks as if she's received a shock. She doesn't want to look at me and I bend a little to see her face. She's crying!

"Oh, darling," I say, silly.

She elbows me off as I try to hug her. I know she's an independent sort. As we move off together she tries to pull away and I continue to grip her wrist so that she may not. It is all rather mad. She's not a child anymore, is she? And more to the point, not my child. Reluctantly, I release her. Doesn't she have any softness in her for me at all, as I've always had for her?

But I seem to have got it wrong. She merely uses her freed hand to pull a handkerchief from the pocket of her coat. She dabs at her eyes. I don't know what question to put, or what to offer to all this sadness.

Her voice is choked. "She blames me for it," she says.

"You? But why?" Dearest child, whom more than once I've picked up with knees bloodied from a fall in the street, her need for my comfort over-ridden by rage at the unfairness of it all, as if life itself had stuck out its foot and tripped her up! How could this slight thing who touches my heart so secretly and so affectionately be the cause of that atrocious phantasm playing out in France and in Flanders? Nothing makes sense these days.

We're walking like comrades now, shoulder to shoulder, the mercantile part of town behind us, trees rearing up beside the road. My eyes are accustoming to darkness, more troubling a transition since the electric was turned on earlier in the year. I'm aware of the swing and kick of our skirts, the grind of our leather soles on

the parched pathway rising towards the north, and I hear the discreet blowing of her nose before she says, “The telegrams were addressed to me.”

Now I see. Paddy has put his sister down as next-of-kin.

“He thought I’d be here to open it, if news came. And then I’d tell Mum. He wasn’t to know I’d have to go up to Brisbane and get a job.”

Norah Martin is too fierce in her emotion. It astounds me sometimes, how she never seems to learn. It’s always been so, except for her great calm when she faces down all the fear in some labouring woman who lies split open and screaming terror at the unknowable pain a child brings in its battle, that great calm she exudes then. And when someone, I for instance, must let go far too early and bloody the sheets with waste, it’s her calmness that makes it endurable. No matter what else the years of knowledge about her have shown, I won’t forget that, ever. All the same, these people live at a pitch I don’t hear, be it fierce or calm, in tears or amidst an extraordinary domestic playfulness. I know nothing of it.

But blaming Katherine! Norah’s never understood her. Of course I am aware of the impurity behind my feelings. I have to be reticent. I say quietly, “You were only trying to shield her.”

“She says I egged him on. He just told me he was doing it, that’s all. I didn’t make him join up.”

“Of course not,” I soothe.

“I’d of joined up, but I can’t help it if I’m a girl.”

She’s so young. I smile to the side, to the verandahed cottage we’re passing, regretting there isn’t someone sitting there in the shadows who’d smile back, the benign amusement of the elders.

“She said something really horrible, too.” She pauses as if, perhaps, to weigh up who will come out of this revelation in the dreariest colours. “She said I fell for a uniform. She said girls are silly for it.”

“But, heavens, he’s your brother. What on earth does she mean? There’s no logic.”

“She means about someone else. Stevie joined up first, and that’s why Paddy did it.”

“Stephen? How is that your fault?” I’m truly becoming enraged at the twists and turns of this unfairness. She doesn’t answer me. Words hang in the air but I can’t make them out.

“What?” I say. “Because he married your sister before he left? Does she think you were in on that, too?”

She turns further away, hiding her face.

The splattering of rain was almost worse than nothing, the night before last. I didn't even hear it, slept through the whole thing. Hope is a cruel kind of trickery. Thirty-six hours later and the sky is squeezed dry. The cracks breaking the earth in the paddocks received no sustenance at all and yesterday, as people walked around with their necks craned upwards scouring the heavens for signs of more clouds, we discovered the only legacy the storm left us was a lightning strike into a timber-dried, grass-crackling gully out the road east.

The wind has been rising all morning and now there's no study of the skies. By the hour, smoke darkens the day and rag-tags of cindered leaves flap and leap-frog in the air. Eyes sting when a bush-fire is so close. We can see the reddening halo above the ridges where the devilish thing is eating up every shred of tree and dropped bark, scorching kangaroos too slow to run and the other poor, caught creatures. The birds have gone, flown off in a panic of wild screeching. Just leaves us, watching.

The Sunday service is coming to a close. I seem to have stood and sung hymns, sat and bowed my head, lost in a dream. I haven't prayed for a long time, as it happens. I've been scooped out, cleaner and cleaner as the years pass. It's only of late I've realised it.

Christopher fidgets beside me. Is he using his prayer book as a fly-catcher? I peruse it from the corner of my eye, the soft leather spine cradled in his palm, gold-tipped folios falling lazily open, then suddenly his fingers harden and butt the book shut. I can feel the sharp breeze from here. Now he's doing it again. Oh well, he's not the only one bored, if that's what he is.

I'm in no hurry to step my way along the pew and surge out into the aisle. I'd prefer just to sit here. He pokes at my elbow with the darned prayer-book, trying to herd me along. I could hit him.

I shrug him off rather pointedly. Nevertheless, I may as well move. We're the last seated. Through the doorway of the porch, I see that the minister is grasping his hands behind his back and rocking on his feet. He wants nothing more than to walk up the path to his own home and follow the wafting smells of a roast dinner. He'll receive no delay from me.

When we reach him I crinkle up my eyes as if I couldn't be jollier. I've never had any intention of betraying my own privacy, not through my manner or any word I might inadvertently say. It is my only protection in this rarefied climate. The minister is busily lifting his brows in wry amusement, possibly at the cheekiness of lightning strikes. But he turns his head from the troupe hanging on his words and reluctantly releases his clasped hands. He pats Christopher amiably on the back though in fact he's herding him further out towards the gate. How does Chris like that? We are practically swept down the church avenue like messy leaves.

The whole town is swathed in a pall of smoke. It hangs over the clock tower as if the sky has dropped. We could be burned alive, every one of us. How do we go merrily along as if this weren't so? Under everything the fear is icy, lurking.

My throat is irritated by the fumes but as I start to cough the act itself is a comfort, a cosy consumption. I stop by a fence and bend over with the growing convulsions. The inside of my hand is pink and warm and sprinkled now with my own moisture. Christopher's white handkerchief, neatly squared, appears in front of my face. I take it, hold it against my mouth and breathe through the cotton. It calms me. It calms me so much that I don't want to release it. I close my eyes and breathe through the mask, my other hand steady on a fence post.

I rise from my delirium to no attentive concern. To the contrary, he stands with his back to me, arms folded, surveying the crackling east. I madden him.

"Excuse me," I murmur politely.

At this he turns and equally politely asks, "Are you recovered?"

"Oh, yes." There's no point in returning his handkerchief, damp with my own heat. I tuck it into my purse to put in the wash later. I wonder how we can possibly go on. It's not in my nature, this nastiness of charade. Nor in Christopher's either. We walk in a silent storm. How have we become so unhappy?

We are saved by the Martins who arrive at the cross-roads just as we do. They look down on us from the cart upon which their life-gatherings are tied with thick hemp rope. Her piano is pushed up against the driver's seat. It plays a ghost tune for us, jangled notes, as the horse is pulled up. The Martins act as if this mysterious musicality is of no consequence, or rather such a natural part of the daily round that to remark on it, notice it in any significant way, would in itself be a curiosity.

Christopher has stopped dead as if he can't fathom the sight before his eyes. Norah and Katherine are seated at the front, straight-backed, in blithe ignorance of the

circus wagon trailing behind them, chairs upended, mattresses a frontier around three sides, a packed tea-chest ballooning a crocheted bed-rug. I recognise the rug. She was making it eighteen years ago. I remember her index finger, the red wool draped beautifully over it, winding the yarn in a waving dangle up from her lap, the blanket growing over her knees, hour upon hour. My head lay sideways on the pillow and I watched, half asleep, too scared to be awake, watched the blunt fingernail, the perfect folds of her joints, the red thread moving and moving.

“Good morning,” she says. The reins are loose in her hands. “What would you make of this fire? Will the winds die down, do you think?”

The boys are sitting in the base of the wagon, Frank lying stretched out on a jumble of suitcases and paper-wrapped packages, his head reclined against the double mattress. Ted kneels up to view us over the top of his mattress. I look to Christopher and he looks at the boys before he responds, with effort I think, “We might be lucky, Mrs Martin. Anyway, no need for you to worry. The men have it under control.”

Kindly meant. But in her eyes I see her own truth before she looks to the east. The men are not here, her eyes say, they are gone. She says, “Well, we still have to move and get it all done. We can worry about the fire later.”

As my husband counters with another comment on the state of the wind and the rain, I’m intrigued by young Teddy whose demeanour alerts me. He has begun to scour about in the base of the cart, apparently looking for something shielded from sight by the mattress. When the flag appears, it’s folded almost as small as a man’s handkerchief. He adjusts himself on his motley platform, kneels up and shakes it out over the side. Teddy looks at me says, “We’re sticking this out the window of our new house.” His eyes are berry-dark and luscious, the incongruity of ginger lashes curling around them. Still a baby.

I feel Christopher stiffen, hear some intake of breath. He will not be able to resist. I’m stilled as he begins.

“You know your brother was fighting in France when those Irish rebels took it on themselves to attempt a revolution. Do you understand that, boy?” he says. “The army had to divert good men out of the field to patrol Ireland, your brother’s comrades. Every man is needed in France. The sooner we’ve won this thing, the sooner they’re all home again.”

I touch the worsted jacket. Under it I feel his slight flesh, the knobs of the back bone.

Teddy's eyes are lowering, though not in surrender if I'm any judge. Christopher is making a mistake and I feel like a fool in front of these people. But it seems he can't stop. "So fold up that Sinn Fein flag, like a good chap, won't you? And fly the flag your brother fights under?" His voice, he considers, is pitched to the ears of a good-natured young rogue, malleable still. Christopher means no malice. Malice is another thing not in his nature. I wish I could explain this to her. Her gaze is at an odd angle, half-watching the draped flag, half-staring stonily at the dirt road.

I grab the tail of his jacket as Chris steps away from me but he pulls free. He's standing on the road beside her now and his voice drops and takes on a sobriety. "It's against the law, Mrs Martin. The law did come in last year and has to be respected by the police. So it would be best if you didn't wave that flag around."

"Sit back down," Norah says over her shoulder, sharply. Teddy slides to the bottom of the cart and the flag slides too, up the side of the horse-hair mattress and over the top. She lifts the reins and brings them down on the horse's rump. The piano tinkles a cacophony of discordant notes as the wheels begin to revolve. At the back, Frank raises his arms and stretches them out to rest along the top of his mattress. It's a declaration of war, this crucified pose. He is his mother's son. Dark hair falls over his forehead.

As the horse trots out on to the main road, she says, "That flag is my own flag and no one will tell me what to do, Mr Greene."

Beside her, Katherine is crimson-faced. She turns to look at me as they pull away. There is sympathy in her air and perhaps a pleading too. I nod. I hope she understands.

Christopher is still standing on the roadway. He doesn't move, doesn't watch their slow departure nor turn to me.

A coughing fit starts up again. I will choke in this atmosphere. I hunt in my purse for his handkerchief, too late for the rudeness of my hacking. I'm retching with it. Still he doesn't turn. I pat my lip as things subside.

"I'll have to get away from this, Chris. Just for a bit," I say. It has come out of the blue. Now that it's said, it's so obvious, so clear a pathway.

"Where?" His voice is almost lost.

I breathe into the cloth and hidden there I say, "I may go up to Brisbane again. Now that I know Madeleine's new house has plenty of room for me."

He has begun to cross the road. I come after him. "Is it mutton or beef?" he says.

I'm so awed at this event, my declaration, that it takes a few seconds to comprehend his query. I suppose the only thing to do is have lunch.



*PEACE*

## Chapter Nine

“**K**issing is a silly and dangerous custom.” Mr Forsythe is the most Bohemian of men, a master of irony. He brings a low branch towards his lips and pretends an amorous encounter with the massed blossoms. Even jacarandas are hugely over-blown up here, or this particular tree at any rate, forest-tall, expansively spreading its boughs in such a way that at this time of year, already late spring by even a southern calendar, our view of the sky is filled with clouds of bluish-purple, and all around us on the manicured grass dropped blossoms make a cloud of the earth, too, so that we’re suspended in some transfigured space, our little tea-party, weeping the brilliance of colour on to the world which must lie somewhere beneath us.

Madeleine wipes her paint-brush on a rag, preparing for an interlude. “You’re the danger, Samuel. I’ve a good mind to report you to the Health Inspector myself.”

“I am falsely accused,” he says, all wide-eyed. I’ve laughed so much today that my cheeks ache. Samuel Forsythe gazes at me with a phoney supplication. What can I say to contribute to the wit?

My hesitation seems to have brought the repartee to a limping halt. Slowly withdrawing from me, he turns his attention to the arrival of the maid. How she carries the weighty tray I can’t imagine, though I see as she lowers her load to the table that her fists are whitened on the handles. I can’t say whether he has noticed the discrepancy between this slight girl, demure in her black dress and crisp white apron, and the fecundity of a steaming tea-pot, heaped plate of sandwiches, the scones and cream, the milk jug and sugar bowl and all the other accoutrements the kitchen has provided for us, yet whatever his motive, Mr Forsythe takes up her hand, tenderly, and bestows his kiss upon it. It’s all part of the performance, of course, but she wouldn’t know that. And perhaps it’s a genuine kindness, who knows? Whatever it is, she blushes, rubs her embraced knuckles nervily against her hip. No doubt this is the first time in her life that a man has flattered her with such courtly reverence. She

would barely be accustomed to the frisson between the sexes at all, this child, coming to her young womanhood in such a pale world. There will be boys enough for her soon, as they sail home and set foot on our own peaceful ground. “Will I pour it?” she says, avoiding his eyes. This is all she has to practise on. An army of light freckles marches across her nose and down on to her cheeks, quite charming. She’ll grow out of them, much as I did myself.

Madeleine is stretching her back after an hour’s painting. Her smock is stained with colours reminiscent of the jacaranda under whose extraordinary light we sit. She gets to her feet and, hands on hips, leans her torso so that her naked neck is offered to the prism of rays piercing through a break in the foliage. She’s a picture herself, handsome in a way women of our age have no right to be.

I am scrambling up off the rug spread on the ground, obliged to respond to the maid’s question as no one else seems to pay it any heed. Forsythe is entranced by Madeleine’s neck or at least is giving that impression. My back is a little caught, also. I’m not used to lounging on the grass, not these days. I walk stiffly to the table and say, “If you put out the cups, I’ll pour. And the strainer, please.”

The pot is heavier even than I thought. My wrist shakes as I try to keep it steady. The girl clangs the silver strainer over the rim of a china cup so indelicately that a bell seems to ring at their rude connection. “Sorry,” she breathes beside me.

The tea is darkly gold and a mist of heat ferments inside the cup. It’s perfectly brewed. The tea streams in a noisy gush against the absolute quiet of the gardens. Even the river is perfectly at rest beyond the avenue of trees. I whisper, “Just ask Mr Forsythe if he takes milk.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she says. She takes a step away and then turns hastily back. “Oh, yes, he does,” she whispers to me. “I just remembered.”

“Offer sandwiches,” I instruct her. I’m better when I have something to do, something like this that has the appearance of a benign organisation but is yet quiet and unobtrusive. And the girl, doubtlessly, is used to orders issued from the sides of mouths. The Art College would be a pleasant place for service I imagine, looser perhaps than a household and more company for her.

“Isabel?”

I look up, the third cup half-filled. Madeleine is facing away from me. “Are those some of your Russian friends?”

We all stare, Samuel Forsythe, the freckled child with a plate of neatly quartered sandwiches in her hands, me holding the teapot. They are coming up the Gardens, a dozen or so of them. Madeleine's tip-off, apparently, is the red flag which two of them are rolling up, one gripping the pole, the other furling it as if he's wringing out the washing. They're an unruly looking bunch, a kind of wildness about them, men and women, dressed with a spectacular disregard for fashion. Something in me wants to throw back my head and laugh. I have put my hand on the hot belly of the pot without realising it.

Samuel is saying, "Are you a bit of a Bolshevik, Mrs Greene? Don't tell me you've been hiding your light under a bushel?"

Madeleine's voice trails in the warm air. "Oh, she's a history with those revolutionaries, Samuel, our Isabel. Consorts with all types, don't you, Iz?"

I fervently hope the approaching gang can't hear her. She has little regard for the feelings of others. Sometimes I think she does it on purpose, embarrassing people.

"They have meetings down there on the river every Sunday," he says. I look at him, waiting for more. He puts his hands in his trouser pockets, jauntily. "They're rolling that flag up inside a newspaper. I believe they do that to get by the police."

One of them laughs, a woman, though we can't hear what they're saying. They'd be speaking Russian, of course. It would really be much more suitable if we were to sit and sip our tea rather than line up like parrots on a branch staring at the world going by.

"Would you like a scone, Mr Forsythe?" I say.

Perhaps he hasn't heard me. I can see the movement of his fingers in his pockets. Not quite as at ease with himself as he pretends, Samuel Forsythe. He's fascinated by the Russians, his eyes following them, a certain unconscious childishness about his open mouth as he watches. He's not the debonair, after all. The whipped cream is already losing its shape, watering at its edges. Even the knife handle, thick and heavy in my hand, is warm and the scones are fresh out of the oven, pleasant to the touch. As I slice one open and let the two halves fall innards-up on my plate, Madeleine's rising voice moves over the garden towards the river. She's saying, "Beautiful day."

And I hear another recognisable voice, distant, say, "It is paradise. Good afternoon to you."

It seems so quiet here, tucked away from the rumpus of the city, that one can hear a tropical pine drop its knobbed cone to the soft, green grass. A river breeze breathes an innocent storm into some hidden point of a tree's shimmering workings. When a voice carries like that, across the green grass, it too sharpens into a kind of beauty, a rude, waking sound that nevertheless is inevitable.

I hold a spoonful of blackberry jam and I'm aware that a stewed whole fruit precariously balances at the shaped silver tip. Lev Kurakin comes to a halt before Madeleine and the blackberry falls to the white linen tablecloth. I try and fail to catch it. The laundry maid will scrub at the spot and will curse me.

"I saw you earlier, Mrs Greene," he says, the voice much closer. "I saw you earlier, Madame, along the Quay." He bows slightly. I thought they didn't do that, Bolsheviks. He's staring at me, as is Madeleine. Where shall I put the damnable spoon of jam?

Samuel leaves his position by the tree trunk and walks down the slight incline. His shoe stumbles at an engorged root, bulging up through the earth, but he balances quickly and doesn't splat himself on the earthy like a ripe berry.

I've put the spoon in my mouth and now I'm oozing black sweet jam. They all three await my interjection. Perhaps he wonders if I remember him at all? The napkin is over-starched and hard. I dab at the corners of my lips as I, too, walk towards him. "Forgive me," I say. "Madeleine, may I introduce Mr Lev Kurakin. My cousin, Miss Madeleine Stevenson. And Mr Samuel Forsythe, of the Art College. We were enjoying an afternoon painting, or Madeleine was."

I can't seem to raise my eyes but I see Forsythe put out his hand. He says, "Delighted, sir." Incongruously, the little maid has trotted along beside me holding her plate of tomato and cold beef sandwiches. I can smell the woody tang of the meat, the hot mustard. We stand apart from the others, neither sure of our moves.

Madeleine has already begun to shower him with her wordy seductions. As easy as breathing she links him, two comrades at arms, and they begin a slow meander past us. Forsythe is just a little misplaced. Lev laughs. I hate Madeleine as I never have before, as if every one of her misdeeds, her snide remarks, the sheer gobbling-up that is her nature, gobbling up of the world and whatever is in it, have come to this pointed moment when she finally steps out from behind the curtain, her real, utterly ambitious self.

As they ascend towards the be-decked table, the modest feast arranged there, it's left to us to gather behind them, to imitate their rhythmic slide, Samuel in silenced mortification at his defeat, me with my trusty shadow trotting back up beside me proffering her sandwiches like a medieval groom, hands aloft, a royal crown on an ancient cushion. That's what we are, the impoverished gentry messaged in from the provinces to fill up a coronation's pews.

"Take mine," I say to him. "Please. I'll get a fresh cup." And I pass the delicacy of the china cup and saucer into his browned hand. I feel as if a warm river is washing in tiny wavelets against my various coasts. "Milk?" I say.

"No." His voice is low as he leans his head towards mine. The sharpness of the table's edge comes between us. "No milk. Sugar, if I may."

How perfect his language is, yet there's nothing of the pedant about him, not like some.

"You do not visit little Katherine these days. She mentioned only a few days ago that you had returned to Brisbane."

I hold the sugar tongs above his cup and drop in a lump. He gazes at the splash. He spoke about me? Together in the dining room perhaps where the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, as she passed the potatoes perhaps, they spoke of me, my train journey, my arrival. "Another?" I ask. And he raises one finger.

"I must see her," I say. The tongs are unruly amongst the blocky nest in the glass bowl. "How is she?"

"Concerned for her brother."

"Oh, yes. She came home to her mother for a day or so, after the dreadful news arrived," I say and I'm overwhelmed with the rawest emotion. I look at him with sudden tears in my eyes. "He must arrive back soon."

"I believe so." He too looks right into my eyes, as if he's asking a question of them. I have never done this before.

The whip of Madeleine's skirt accompanies the sound of her voice and now she's a distraction to us. "If you absolutely insist, Mr Kurakin, you may view my poor apology of a painting now. Samuel's deft hand has obliterated one or two major errors." She is distracted by the sugar lump I have managed to capture and she watches it drop into Lev's cup.

As he picks up the spoon, which is ridiculous between his fingers, he gazes away from me to her, her brownish hair alight with sun and loosened artistically in wisps about her face and I gaze at her too, studying her features in a sad sort of anxiety, fearful of every mark of appeal. She's a vibrant person, that's what they say, have always said since we were children and I see the light on her cheeks, the way her brow works, the unconscious expressiveness. But he looks beyond her now, to where the eager servant, Samuel, stands in perusal of the canvas perched on its easel, his head cocked to one side.

Lev says, "With pleasure", in such a manner as to hint he's forgotten his insistence, only a handful of minutes ago, to see the great work. Madeleine's brow suggests she's understood his dampened enthusiasm and is somewhat unsure. "Now we shall see," he continues, rising to the occasion. He addresses Samuel, "What do you think, Forsythe, has Miss Stevenson outshone the masters?", and he strides off, still stirring his black tea.

Madeleine's smile is unstable as he passes her. She whispers to me, "Don't you like him?", accusingly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you acting like that? You're as unwelcoming, Iz, honestly. Can't you at least try to be little gracious? Is it because he's a Bolshevik?" Her eyes are engorged. Beside her nose, tiny bubbles of perspiration betray agitation as much as heat.

"You know I'm not political, Madeleine. I couldn't care less what he is."

"Well, at least try, will you? He came up to talk to you, after all." And she gives me such a look.

I'm not unaware of the sinfulness of my present situation. I'm aspiring, conspiring, whatever the word is, and if it takes steering Madeleine by her own wheel it seems I'm prepared to do that. To what end I can't quite conceive. Certainly not anything of the carnal. I'm certainly not of an immoral nature, whatever other weakness might disclose itself. My cousin has been suffragette, pacifist, fiery supporter of the working class, now let her be Bolshevik. She would never think of herself as a little too wealthy for their tastes. That is not of concern to her. I can see in her already, now the war has been declared over, after the euphoric first few days of peace, an anxious disappointment, already a prophetic regret at the steady levelling on the daily graph,

no peaks of excitement, no tragic heaving as this front line falls, this battle fails. Madeleine's trouble is she's untouched. She lives in a paradisiacal world where the serpent is a playmate, hissing and uncoiling in mock depravity, and she can run from him, pretending panic, peep at his settling self through a frontier of leafery. Never bitten though, never the shock of pain, the scar of knowledge that death will follow. That's how she does it, Madeleine, in her hysterical enjoyments, and that's why she has the knack of upsetting me.

Bumping along beside me in the comradely Sunday procession, already converted I suspect, the shade cast by her umbrella drifting like a mad cloud here, there and everywhere, she eyes a stunned passer-by on the footpath, someone she knows from a dinner party I suppose, and turns around to make an engaging comment to the poor foreign man shuffling behind us, who smiles broadly to cover his lack of comprehension. The sun is relentless, convinced in its burning heat; I've never felt anything like it, having always avoided the hot North during the high-summer months like any sane person would. Ahead of us, a huge banner is carried by two stalwarts and if only I had the nerve I'd disentangle from Madeleine and place myself under its billowing shadow. Some lucky few are doing precisely that. Lucky or well-practised. How the children manage I can't say, yet they behave as children anywhere, boys darting and weaving, toddlers with huge tears dribbling down their reddened faces, little girls aware only of their games, skipping, rhyming, clapping hands, these two in front of me managing to walk straight ahead while turned to face one another, slapping rights hands together, slapping the left. And the Bolshevik mothers refusing bites of bread or slices of sausage till they get there.

The river is alive with light, too sharp to watch. I half-close my eyes so the water and light become a glinting dream. I'm too hot, too exhausted, too overwhelmed by noise and the disruption foreigners bring. Yet I can't possibly be anywhere else, or want to be, for I'm also swamped with some inner heat, some sharp, glinting blade. He has become a magnet for me and I'm a poor, fatigued shaving of metal, limp on a workman's bench till he's near. And then I'm alive. I'm quite ill with this thing.

The party is turning in through the gates of the Domain, the banner caught by a gust of river breeze, bulging pregnantly while the stalwarts grapple with their poles. A red motor van has been at the back of the parade and now speeds up to fly past me. I've seen it before, tootling about. I thought it rather amusing. I suppose it's easier on



the feet than walking, if revolutionary leaflets need to be distributed to the townsfolk. I should try to be more sober in my estimation of things. It's not that I don't believe what they say. After all, there's got to be something better than this. I know, for instance, that Norah Martin has twice the wit I do and somewhat more than that when it comes to my thoughtless cousin. Somehow money comes into it. When I think of Mrs Martin, I'm humiliated by the ease I was born into, much less than Madeleine's but rather more than the Irishwoman's, and with the moderate comfort my marriage afforded me. At home, when the poor Irish tip their caps to me and even when the Blacks wrapped in their blankets step out on the road to allow me pass by on the footpath, I feel wretched and angry. I'm angry at them, at the very ones who shame me, isn't that a terrible admission? Perhaps we do need over-turning in punishment for all the wrongs. Perhaps this is the year for it, our Nemesis. I should read some of their tracts, take home a couple of leaflets at least, before someone asks me a question and it becomes clear that I know nothing about it. Was Karl Marx a Russian, too, like Lenin and the Czar? Now that's a quibble I have. I don't think they should have shot the Czar and Czarina. And particularly the children, they shouldn't have shot them. I can't see why they'd shoot children.

"Garlic," she says.

The umbra of her parasol cools me suddenly as she leans towards my ear and repeats in a whisper, "Garlic, that's the smell."

Heavens, I hope nobody heard her. She implicates me in her carelessness, always has. If you can't bear the smell of foreigners then why pretend interest in the great heavings of the world? Why not just stay inside your own sitting room and play euchre? And never feel anything for anyone?

"Find somewhere to spread the rug, Iz. Pity there isn't a tree we could get under." The shade swings away from me as she turns to the river. "Well, there's a few down there, but I don't suppose we'll be able to hear the speeches if we do that. You don't think they'll all be in Russian, do you?"

"Good Lord, I hadn't thought of that. We're not the only Australians, are we? Look, there's a couple of soldiers behind us." The tartan rug is warm and prickly in my hands. Madeleine's as careless of the spiked ribs of the darn thing as she is of everything else. She almost took my eye out as she swung back to look at the two fellows.

"Are they with us or agin us?" she says mysteriously.

The two young men, tall and brown as leather, are slowly wandering over to the red van where it's parked amid a cluster of those who appear to be in charge. And there he is, Lev Kurakin, as tall as the Australians. He's engaged in conversation with a woman, Marina's her name, I think. Yes, Marina. That night at the theatre, how I distrusted the serpent-eyed glance she cast in my direction. Or perhaps I'm mixing her up with the actress. But I do remember distinctly her sitting next to the other Russian girl, the young married one, both of them glancing at us over their drinks, Katherine and I. Rather unwelcoming. I instinctively disliked her, I seem to recall. Her whole attention is on Lev. See the way she flatters him with her subtle movements, her face moving by necessary degrees so that he can't avoid gazing at her. And that hand coming up to rest on his arm. It stays there, too long. Won't he shake it off? But he's smiling down at her. Oh, no.

"It's all right. They know them," Madeleine reports.

I hold the rug against my breast. I'd as soon leave now. Perhaps a trip on a ferry would do, seeing as we're here by the river. The breeze would be good, essential even, tangy spray splintering against my face, salty to the tongue. Oh, to wash off the sweat sliming on my skin. The sun is vicious out here in the open.

"Iz! Are you going off with the fairies again?"

I can't bear to look towards the red van. I don't need to have my nose rubbed in it. Madeleine stands imperious, a hand on her hip. I wish she'd at least raise the net of her hat. It looks ridiculous out here on waste ground, the roughest of picnics.

"The rug, Iz," she says, as if I'm an imbecile. As she stares at me her expression changes and turns to perplexity. "What?" she says.

There's nothing for it but to endure this, if only to avoid further humiliation. Isn't it as plain as the nose on one's face? The Russian woman, Marina, is his woman. That explains those looks she'd cast in my direction. I've mistaken his old world charm for interest of another variety, simple as that. Or else he's of a flirtatious nature and I've been one of many dazzled moths. I'm not sure which is the worst alternative. The rug refuses to lie down square and I shake it again in the dead air. In the end I'm reduced to crawling around on my hands and knees to spread it out on the dried earth. One knee meets a jagged stone hidden beneath the blanket but I can't immediately extricate myself through the tangle of skirt and petticoat. If I were to roll down my stocking, I'm sure there'd be an imprint on my white skin.

“What’s wrong with you?” she says. Her voice is surprisingly close. I hadn’t noticed that she’d seated herself, plumping about to find comfort.

“I got a stone in my knee.”

“Oh, Heavens, you’re supposed to be a country girl.”

She’s fiddling with her basket, whatever it is she got the cook to pack in there. You’d swear we were on another Riviera somewhere, indulgent, free of any care. She produces a terrine, sheened in aspic. She’s completely engaged in pursuit, retrieving silverware bundled inside a linen napkin, a wedge of bitter cheese. Let her embarrass us all she likes with her disregard for the present circumstances, the darkly wide eyes of children struck into stillness by the sight of the cornucopia on our tartan rug. I don’t care anymore.

There are footsteps behind me, crushing leaves blown dryly down from the Gardens. A snapped hollowed twig alerts me as if I have an animal’s awareness and I’m momentarily silenced in myself. I feel the weight of a presence. Someone seems to crouch at my back. A flush of hope sharply rises in me. Don’t let me be wrong.

“May I join you?” he says.

I smile privately, deeply, before I turn around. His voice affects me in a way that’s visceral. I sense the blood gathering.

“Delighted, Mr Kurakin,” my cousin says. “Well, you have put on a good crowd. You must be pleased. A few Australians, too, I see.”

“We wish for more, Miss Stevenson. But it seems you Australians are not natural revolutionaries, if you’ll forgive me.”

“Oh, but they like a good fight, I assure you of that,” she says.

“Oh yes, but a revolution is a thing of the soul. It is absolute.”

I shift my hip and move about to face them. “You make it sound like God,” I say.

He looks at me. Is he surprised, or what is it? Why won’t he respond? Madeleine, of course, ploughs straight on. “You’ll just have to persuade us, Mr Kurakin,” and his gaze is again pulled away from me. She’s sitting there on her haunches, polishing a silver fork with a napkin as if it matters. She has a rather coquettish look.

“If I can. Persuasion is an important weapon in the fight. The crowd loves the hero, Miss Stevenson. Through history this has been proved again and again. As some

of us see it, the crowd is the canvas upon which the artist creates a picture according to his will.”

“Well,” and Madeleine laughs. “Russians have a poetic soul, so they say.”

The secret fire this man has stoked in me for these last days, or months I suspect, has gone awry somehow, a flame of anger now, pure and unhidden. “I think that’s a disgrace.” I hear my own voice, surprised.

Both of them stare, but I can’t stop. “Do you honestly believe that?” I say to him. “The crowd is a canvas? That’s the most shocking thing I ever heard.”

“Why do you object?” he says quietly.

“Well, because we’re supposed to respect everyone, not use everyone like that. It’s horrible.”

His eyes are studying my features. Have I said too much? And now his glance drops. He reaches out to touch a brown skeleton of a leaf. I watch him turn it over, delicately. Its thin ribs hold the fragile structure in place. If he were to apply pressure, he could crush it. He says, still focused on the leaf, “Perhaps it is for the benefit of the crowd, that this psychology happens. But I too believe in respect of the individual, Mrs Greene.”

“You can’t believe in both.” I don’t know where I’m finding the words. I’m speaking with two tongues, anyway, does he understand that? Why has he left that Marina woman to come down to us, anyway? What are we, part of his plan, souls to be baptised today?

He draws up one knee to rest his fist on it, the tiny stem still pinched between his thumb and finger. He twirls the leaf, first one way, then the other. “This is my struggle, Mrs Greene. Precisely.”

Twisted as I am on the rug, my arm hurts from the weight of supporting me. My physical discomfort has caught on a splinter of anxiety under his skin. He was all strength a moment ago but now I see a fissure opening up in him and what I see touches me. I want to be kind, suddenly.

“No one is without struggle,” I say. “And as for me, I know nothing at all about the world. You want it better, don’t you?”

He opens his hands as if he has no answer and has nothing. The leaf drops to the blanket. Is that who he is? Out of nowhere I understand something, and I say, “Do you miss Russia?”

His response is slow to come. Madeleine is preparing a small plate with rolled napkin and cutlery which she'll hand to him as her own gesture, and she will prick this moment and cause it to fall airless to the ground. His voice staves her off. "You would love the north, Mrs Greene. That is where you'll see the real Russia. If I took you into the forest, and under the pine trees to the river one night! When I was young, a student, I once slept on gathered hay, under a rosebush. The smells, all night, you would never need wine. You would not be frightened, I assure you, and you would never lose sight of me, because the sun never deserts, not during those months. Even as it sinks beneath the river, its light remains. There are clouds, small ones, but they are purple, and the sands below the cliff become crimson. And all night, you lie and watch the boats far down the river, the black figures of the fishermen, and as morning comes the mist rises and sucks at the pines. The peasants say a devil comes in those white nights, tall as a pine and armoured in plaited bark and, not blessed with speech, he can only flap his arms. That's the sound you hear from the forest, do you see, it's a branch creaking or breaking, some such thing? And then perhaps a little fear comes, for after a night like that, one is no longer oneself."

I am quite still. For the first time in my life, I'm completely still. Madeleine's little offering, her china plate, the diagonal of cutlery, hovers by his elbow but he doesn't seem to notice. I wish she weren't here.

When he finally sees the plate, he brushes at his knees and starts to rise. Madeleine looks up at him. "Please forgive me, Miss Stevenson. But I must go," he says. "I hope you won't find the afternoon too monotonous."

An ant is crawling over a dark red square of the tartan. I look at it and say, "We'll just slip off, when we're ready."

"But won't you have something to eat, Mr Kurakin. We've plenty." Madeleine is too silly for words, really. Doesn't she realise there are more important things in the world than a picnic by a river? He must consider us foolish women indeed.

His shadow is over me. The sun is too glaring and I daren't risk gazing up. The ant pauses at the mountainous prospect of my hand and I angle my finger down to invite him.

"Regrettably, I must decline. It looks very good, the meat loaf. Is it meat loaf?"

“It’s a terrine, rather tasty if I do say so myself,” she says as if she sweated in the kitchen over it. I wish I were the type to say, “Make it yourself, did you, Madeleine?”, or perhaps “What is that subtle herb flavour I detect?”

“You are kind, but I have matters to attend to. So ...,” he says. As long as he stays standing there, casting his shadow, the ant will continue its journey across the bridge of my fingers, down into the webbed valleys, bravely charge upwards again. “You may slip off?” he asks.

He uses my own word to catch me. And now I don’t know which course to follow. Does he wish us off, his duty done? I can’t decipher him. I pull my legs around, place my hands on my raised knees, my tiny passenger panicked by the change in atmosphere and he rises in the air, bullish in his fear. The shadow shifts.

“We’re not sure,” Madeleine is saying. I turn my hand this way and that, the sun blinding the hairs on my arm, but the ant escapes to the taut balloon of my skirt. “We’re not sure what we’re doing,” she says, rather lamely.

“Very nice to see you,” he says and I watch the movement of his legs as he walks away. The ant’s on my ankle, and now he scurries down the leather of my white shoe.

Madeleine is silent. She slices the terrine, places a piece on a plate and shoves it across the rug towards me. I’m really quite amazed to see the upset on her face. She makes busy, preparing her own plate. Without even a glance, she says, “You could at least have invited him to come back later and have something.”

Then I understand. It makes much more sense, of course, only I hadn’t thought of it. Madeleine is unmarried. She so entertains the world, and is so happily entertained by it, that one no longer sees her as casting about for a husband. Her seductions are a commitment to self-flattery, that’s all. But she has fallen under his spell. We are a pitiful pair.

## Chapter Ten

**I**'m in everyone's disfavour. Not only Christopher finds me intransigent. Madeleine says she simply can't comprehend my refusal to travel into the country with her to our grandmother's home, to find sanctuary there over these hot Christmas weeks. I would, if Granmama were still alive. But, I don't know, I'm just not up to it. To be truthful, when she issued the threat that I'd be entirely on my own, not even a maid to do the housework, my heart sang.

I'm more reliant on the tram and ferry, that's true. What an indictment of my habit-forming ways that Madeleine's motor car has become a necessity of sorts. I'll be ruined after this. All the same, I'm enjoying the solitude of this tram-ride, tucked up by the window with my own thoughts. I thought that was an old tree trunk, the relic of a felled gum, but I see now it's a fisherman sitting absolutely motionless on the brown grass. A wooden rod is propped between his knees and I imagine I see its line of cat-gut bowed to the hidden current. Yet I can't actually make it out. The light is too intense.

The truth is I've been intending to have Katherine Martin out for afternoon tea or a walk on the grassy, quiet hill beside Madeleine's where she could see all the lovely houses, the wide picture windows overlooking their gardens. As the days ticked by, I'd failed to fulfil my obligation to her mother. Mrs Martin would be counting on me. She'll rush down the street to me as soon as I return home, eager for news. I'll look forward to that. If I weren't so far from home, I wouldn't mind calling in on Norah Martin, or opening my front door to her, leading her down to sit with me for a while. I miss the cedar smell of the dark hallway. And the yellowed blind on my bedroom window. Waking with that yellowed light filtering in, hearing the kookaburras at dawn as I roll over for another doze and later the sharp, sweet cries of other bush birds. The emptiness of the house as I walk downstairs in my dressing gown, through to the kitchen, Christopher already left for his office and Mabel not yet arrived, not yet banging her way into the scullery, the peg for her hat and coat still vacant on the wall by the silent back door.

What on earth am I doing? I was never brave. I'm not that sort of person. Never questioned, not out loud at any rate. I must be like those streets in Paris they talk about, the ones seen in postcards these days, blind to all that goes on under their cobbled paving and leafy broad boulevards, all that echoes under the foundations of admirable buildings and that snakes along under alleyways too, the twists of older times. All of Paris going along without knowledge of the watery channels beneath it, the damp brickwork and echoing chambers, the undreamt-of lives lived down there, long-tailed and nocturnal, hateful to contemplate really.

I don't know what made me picture that. A postcard I saw the other evening, most probably, Madeleine's theatre friends, passed from hand to hand along the table for all to see. The relief of it all being over, that's what makes us rather silly and frivolous. Until recently, people didn't peer so curiously at letters and cards, not over these past five years. We were more circumspect. Who knew what might happen next, what news might come of the sender even by the following day?

Quite a lot of them are home already, walking in twos or threes on the streets, not unstuck from each other yet. They change the tenor of the place. The further into the centre of town the tram slides, the more I see of them, coming out of shops, ducking into public houses. One's there alone, strolling along at the same pace as the tram, right beside my window. He must be hot in his uniform. It's the colour, like mud, or desert I suppose. He'd be cooler in a white shirt; at least it would reflect back the sun's rays. A trickle of perspiration, a tiny stream, is leaking from under his slouch hat, sliding down the side of his forehead, past his ear. He doesn't seem to be aware of it. Passers-by give him a look, the men almost embarrassed, or worse. I wonder if they feel unmanly by contrast. Though one old man in his town suit is trying to catch his eye. But the soldier is not catching anyone's eye, not even the two girls who glance at each other, and laugh in that way girls do, eager for some notice to be taken, some connection to be made, some proof of their power. Maybe he's shy. He's raising his sun-burned forearm to wipe at that slide of sweat.

He's turned his head. Did he feel my gaze? He looked right at me as if I'd called him. I hadn't realised I was leaning in my seat, twisting to look behind as the tram picks up speed. Shy or not, his eyes glance over me, my face, my shoulders. I raise my hand as if shielding my breast. He's only a boy, surely, yet he smiled at me as if I were his age. No, not even that, nothing to do with age. The war has changed



them. They've forgotten something. I pray the tram doesn't stop for a while, or that he turns at the corner, one or the other.

They've changed the air. They're heavier, taller than the rest of us. They make me feel fright, as if one of them might take flight, a khaki frog in a sudden, calculated leap. How I used dread the season when I was small, the walk by the river to school, the insect-hungered, bloated croaks, the eyes, drooping lids that belied the swiftness of the next move.

My shoulder blades arch as I ease my way along the packed aisle, step down into the glaring sunlight. I suspect this entire venture has doom about it. Where the heart lacks purity, collapse will follow, that is the pattern of human life. I should be weeding Madeleine's rose garden. It will be over-run by the time she gets back and her ire will be justly raised.

Foolish to fidget like this outside the department store. Katherine has probably already seen me through the shop window.

As it turns out, she couldn't have seen me. I walk down the aisles, far into the darkened bowels of the shop. The glove counter is in a demure spot, unassailed by the merely curious who wander in only as far as the new summer dresses. There isn't even a fan too close and so the bunched crowds who are pretending interest in certain stocked shelves, pinching out the back of their blouses for the lapping breeze, have taken up positions in the store but nowhere near her. She still hasn't spotted me.

As I come closer, I see her ghostly reflection in the high polish of her counter top poking a finger into her bun, tucking in a loose strand. Her other hand is elegant, quite unconsciously so, propped on her rounded hip. Something about that pose is testimony to her plucky spirit, the one which has no truck at all with the demeanour required of her current situation. I don't suppose she realises that. Katherine's a most complex girl. Woe betide her if she sniffs too much at the air and gallops off. How her life will play out then causes me concern. I know her, somehow.

She smiles, shows surprise and, perhaps, embarrassment. Officially she's someone other than herself here. How well they all speak, the working girls who serve in such places. To be caught out in another guise is a dangerous thing. For a moment shame at the pretence flares in her face, flames briefly at her eyes. She thrusts her thumbs into her waistband and adjusts her skirt.

"Mrs Greene," she breathes.

“Is it all right, Katherine? I don’t want to get you in trouble.” I really should have thought about this.

Her glance slides over my shoulder. I can’t resist looking behind me where, standing by a pillar, a gentleman apparently dressed for a formal engagement gazes directly at her. He puzzles me till I realise that he illustrates the point I’d failed to grasp in the planning stages of this mad expedition. Clearly he’s the floor manager, a rather ghastly power emanating from the silent, watchful stance he takes, hands apparently clasped behind his back. That he probably picks his teeth with his pinkie’s fingernail when he’s at home lounging in his dense, over-heated little sitting room I’d hesitate to mention to the girl. She’ll only land herself in trouble with such thoughts.

“Pretend I’m looking at some gloves, Katherine. Take down a box.” The manoeuvre came to me from nowhere, gamely, and I sense a frisson of mutual excitement. She’s trying not to laugh as she eases out an embossed box from the neatly packed shelf behind her.

But her face is a picture of studied decorum as she places the box on the polished counter, lifts the lid and daintily folds back the tissue paper. “Now, Madam,” she says, her nostrils flared. “Our finest kid, dove grey.”

I’m afraid the stage is not for me. I close my eyes in anxiety as she finishes her description, wordlessly unable to beat her performance. Still, the life of a spy has its pleasures and I delicately rub my finger across the glove and feel first the unexpected soothing of it and then the tingling shift to the pearl button. “Very nice,” I manage to articulate, not able to think of anything else.

“Note the stitching, barely visible.” She’s impressive. I look at her face instead of at the needlewoman’s skill. She’s gazing at her kid gloves as if they were a matter of some cherishing. Her hair looks freshly washed, gleaming red in the low light, luxuriant in its pile on the top of her head. One of the hairpins shows itself. Her hair is very soft, of course, and doesn’t always obey the rigidities of combs and pins.

I lean close to her across the counter and say quietly, “I was wondering how you were getting on. Is everything all right?”

“Oh, yes,” she murmurs. “I’m good.”

“Listen, my cousin has gone away to the country and I thought you might like to come out on the week end. I suppose you’re working on Saturday?”

“Only the morning. I could come out in the afternoon.”

“Good, well it’s a bit cooler up where her house is, too. We could sit out on the verandah and get a bit of a breeze. It’d do you good.”

“Can I get a tram up to it?” She picks up the lid of the glove box and reads the trademark with respectful care.

I am beginning to enjoy my part now. I open my purse as I murmur, “I’ve got it all written down. You could do with a nice salad, too, I suspect. I’m not saying you don’t get fed well at the boarding house.”

“We don’t get variety. Mutton and veg, usually.”

I study the coins in my purse and the folded page of instructions I wrote out earlier. I avoid her gaze as I casually say, “And those foreigners there, they must find it hard. Did Mr Kurakin mention I’d bumped into him?” I withdraw my note and see the tram number and, now that I see it, a rather garbled set of directions.

“Yeah, he did. He said you came down to the Domain one day.”

I re-fold the note and crease the edge with my fingers. “He’d be welcome to come along, too, of course. If he had nothing better to do.”

She’s silent. I know I have blushed and my throat’s constricted. I can’t raise my eyes.

“Oh,” she says. “Yeah, all right. I’ll ask him.”

“Anyway,” I say and I finally slide the note across the counter towards her. “It’s you I want to see. You’ll have to tell me all the news of your brother.”

Adroitly, she slips my note into her skirt pocket. “What time, about?” And she tucks the translucent tissue protectively around the gloves again.

Be careful what you wish for. At long last he’s here and his leg is resting on the bamboo footstool, my own foot perched on the rung underneath it, and I’m so horribly awkward and so horribly aflame. The fragrance of his tobacco is wildly heady; they must purchase some strange brand, the Russians. I can see the hard hump of his knee through the cloth of his trousers and the tight mound of his calf muscle. A fold of my dress is so close it almost touches him and I smooth it down as if to avoid contact. He’s watching my hand as I stroke the silk.

The remnants of the meal are listless on the round white table, which sits abandoned now in the corner nook of the verandah. It’s better that Madeleine didn’t leave any help, though a maid would have that table cleared and the linen cloth

shaken out by now. Privacy is more important. No newsy word dropped deliberately or otherwise.

Does Katherine sense it, something shuddering on my skin? Does she judge the shared footstool as a transgression, the two inches of space between his leg and mine? Or put it down to casual forgetfulness in this air of languid satisfaction, the loosening of summer afternoons? I'm drunk on it and beyond good behaviour. She says, her voice edging into this moment of over-heated silence, "Would you like me to start the washing up?"

His leg shifts and now slowly withdraws from the stool. He crosses it over the other leg, away from me. I could strangle her.

"Later, maybe. Unless you'd like to."

But he says, "Rest, Katherine." He should really be more formal with her. She's not a child. "You have been working all morning. Rest."

And what of me? I worked this morning, too, went early to the shop for ham and tomatoes and fresh bread. The cake took two hours, between the one I burned and then having to bake another, beat the cream, slice a bunch of bananas down from the tree in the back garden. That wasn't easy, quite a task in fact. Why do they consider they deserve all adulation? You'd think it was a badge of honour these days, being in the working classes.

I don't want them to think it's time to go, that's the crucial thing. "I tell you what," I say. "We'll just clear the table and I'd love a glass of sherry, what do you think? We'll go inside, away from the moths and mosquitoes."

He shrugs, suggesting his willingness to go along with it and yet his eyes, flighty, follow some other restless thing out into the growing darkness of the garden. I'm afraid he's ready to leave. It's Saturday night. Why would he choose to spend it here in this leafy, well-fed suburb with a woman whose anxiety grimaces her face into plainness, who knows nothing of the world, barely reads the newspaper? But I want him here, not for any purpose, just that he'd be here and I could smell his tobacco and watch the movements of his hands; surely that is of some consequence?

Katherine sits up straight in the wicker chair, hands on the armrests as if she's about to rise. "Have you got time, Lev?"

Lev, she calls him.

"A little, perhaps. But I must take you home before."

"Oh, you have to go somewhere?" I ask, casually.

“I’m afraid, yes. I must attend a meeting late tonight and I’ll stay there until the morning. But I do not like Katherine to find her way home in the dark.”

“I see.”

He has squeezed in this afternoon appointment out of politeness. Let him go then, if he wants to go.

“Unless she is staying here.” He taps his pipe upside down into the ashtray I have provided for him. “Then I could remain a little longer.”

In the evening light of dainty kerosene lanterns which I much prefer to the sharp puncture of the dangling electric globe, Katherine looks pale to me. He was right. The dark fell almost before we’d moved ourselves and pushed the verandah chairs back against the wall to ward off the dawn’s dew. We’d piled clinking crockery into a manageable whole for Lev to carry inside, we two his bustling handmaidens, me holding the door open with my elbow, Katherine flapping the crumbed tablecloth over the railing into the path of the garden’s nocturnal life.

It’s a dangerous time, soldiers returning, the relief simmering into an unexpected stew. I would not let her go out there now even if she uncurled from the sofa and insisted on running for a tram. She’s drained with tiredness anyway, that’s obvious.

I know he will leave at any moment. I have never been so happy in all my life, sipping the sherry from a fleur-de-lis shot glass, my lips tingling as I take my third fill. The downy cushion has a watery caress tonight and my head, heavy and listless, falls back against it and I almost close my eyes. Not quite closed; open enough to glint at the figure facing me, also sipping from his glass. Whatever words are said, they do not say what I want to hear, not even my own words.

But it had to come. His glass rings as he places it carefully on the glass-topped table beside him. He looks at me and says, “I would prefer to stay.” And he stands up.

Katherine begins to unfurl. I think she may have nodded off. I raise my head and bite my numbing lip. I’m slightly overcome by the sherry.

“Don’t get up,” he says to her, and Katherine falls back. “Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

“Thank you, Lev,” she says sleepily. She’s like a child there, her hair unpinning, lop-sided.

I get to my feet and glide past him so close and so quick that I imagine I create a breeze on his skin. Floor boards creak their night noises under me as I walk down the dark hallway. He's following me. Drops of moonlight fall in through the clear glass of the windows at the front door, diamonds framing red poppies, oblongs shaping autumn-blown leaves, and in this reverse light the stained colours are quiet, almost indecipherable one from the other. I fold my arms and wait for him. He's in quiet shadow, too. I suppose we must revert to the mundanity of words now, of thanks and farewells and cheerios.

The touch of his fingers on the soft, warmed skin in the crease of my elbow shocks me, and I move as if to step back. But he lifts my other hand, which has been resting there in that hollow, and raises it to his lips. His breath is strong and tickles at the tips of my fingers. I'm quite stunned so that I barely see how he turns the latch of the door.

I lean into the long, cool edge of the doorway, watching him walk down the front steps. He looks back from the gate just as a cloud belches across the moon and perhaps he smiles. I hear his footsteps for a while, the thud of his heels. The air is still so hot. I won't sleep tonight.

I haven't touched the piano since I arrived at Madeleine's. But tonight, without saying a word to Katherine as I return inside, simply smile at her sleepy self on the sofa and tug on the electric light cord by the door, I walk across the room, open the lid and slide on to the stool. My fingers are numbed and languorous, too, as I run chords up and down the keys. She comes quietly over to stand at my shoulder.

"See if there's anything easy in there," I say and nod my head towards the pile of sheet music on the piano top.

She eases one out, studies it. But already the mood has gone off me. I cease the pointless chasing of chords and fold my hands on my lap. "What about this?" she says.

Katherine wakens me to ancient responsibility. Who I would be with Madeleine or indeed with Katherine's mother, I cannot be with her. Is this all the maturity of years comes down to, a kind of play-acting? Whether it's pretence or not, I can't get up from the piano now and throw myself on the sofa, or wander off to the privacy of my room. And so to satisfy her youthful expectancy, I curb my restlessness, the unfamiliar ardour and take the sheet from her, *The Merry Widow* as

it turns out, a choice too coincidental with my mad moodiness to pass unnoticed. I prop it on the ledge and smooth it unnecessarily with my hand, the page cool and silken, the pads of my fingers and palm swollen from the unaccustomed heat, I suppose. Even my wedding ring is tight, narrowing the flesh into a waist.

“I love this one,” she says as I carefully place the spread of my fingers on the ivory and black keys and begin to play the introduction. I’m too slow. She hums along beside me, sustaining a note till I find the next arrangement.

It is beautiful, this mounting and falling, and the English lyrics, normally an embarrassment in a language so wilfully prosaic and so dismissive of inebriation, render me victim tonight. To die for love. As I sing in my reedy voice along with her truer tone, we lean into each other melodramatically and I pout my eyes into teardrops, fundamentally disputing the very concept. I am in such moral confusion that I don’t know which is the theatre and which the real.

The recital is a limping affair by the end, but we get to it much as the gramophone needs a wind-up or two before the record is playing out. And when we laugh, the stiff constraints of our strange evening – she an uncanny guest in my cousin’s house and Lev who was the natural lynch-pin as the hours wheeled by now slipped out and gone – seem to loosen between us. “I’m dreadful,” I say. “I’ll have to practise.”

“No, that was good.” She reminds me of someone, of course, and I see the hint of awe in her, standing beside the lady in her silk, the lady with the experience of years and born of a family that attains to a standing in society. More than awe, if Kate’s really as I was in the tenderer part of her, a truer elevation, a kind of love. All so undeserved by me.

Tonight I’m gushing with emotion. I stand and take her arm, the warm skin against mine, and we walk in a comic slow march to the sofa. “Now,” I say as I flop into a corner, propped by cushions. “Tell me how things are for you.”

She sits down, removing a shoe before she tucks one leg under her, carefully keeping a distance between us. Even when I rest my arm along the sofa’s back, there’s still a comfortable lake of separation. Her dress is straight, hinting at the rounded shapes underneath, lovely on a girl with her blessings, terribly unbecoming on a stocky woman. The colour doesn’t really suit her, a serviceable beige, cheap cotton. I wonder how she’d look if she had money. The heels on her black shoes need

doing, too; I can see that clearly as she wriggles her foot in the air. Doesn't she have a lighter pair? The black with a pale beige doesn't go, not in this bright weather.

"Since the war's over?" she asks.

I hadn't meant that. I meant more generally, I suppose, but I say, "Yes."

She looks towards the sideboard, the two figurines there, plaster-of-paris underneath the ebony gloss, a half-naked woman draped from the waist down and seated beneath her a man on the grass gazing up, supplicant – at least in Madeleine's mind I suspect. Over them both is a vase which I filled today with ferns and red hibiscus flowers.

"Stevie's coming home," she says.

"Stephen Ferguson? Isn't that wonderful news for your sister! And his parents, of course."

"Yes." She doesn't seem inclined to elaborate.

"When's Mary expecting him?"

She shrugs and says, "She's not a hundred per cent sure."

"He was the best young horseman in the district, Stephen."

Still she gazes at the figurines, the vase of flowers. Her pins have let her down, adamant insects clinging stickily to the sliding roll. It's down about her left ear.

"You used to ride with him, didn't you? I recall you almost knocked me down one day, the two of you, jumping a fence. You leaped right out on to the road in front of me."

Charmingly she covers her face with her hands. "Oh, God, I remember," she says behind her hot palms. "Sorry."

"You didn't get me. Not that either of you stayed around very long to check. You were over the fence into the next paddock before I could pick up my hat."

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry. We saw you were all right and we were in a race." She dismantles her self-imposed prison bars and her face appears, flushed red.

"Who were you racing?"

"I was racing him and he was racing me." Her colour seems to get even higher.

"Don't perturb yourself, Kate. I was joking." I'd like to reach over and pull the unwieldy bun down, pacify her like a little girl, stroke the lovely hair. It's not my place to do that and so I pluck at a loose green thread on the paisley throw laid across the sofa back.



She slides her foot free from under her and uses it to lever off her other shoe. It falls with a thud to the floor rug. At last, thankfully, she shakes her head till her hair abandons its useless pins and drops loose to below her shoulders.

She says, "I wish terrible things didn't happen in life."

"So do I." I've been twirling the green thread as if it were a dandelion stem and now I stop. She's almost closed her eyes. Her lashes are so long and thick that they cast a shadow on the bone. How much has it worried her heart, all the sharp drama of her family's life, the father walking out the door, Norah's constant, nagging anxiety about money? And then Paddy, of course, joining up and going overseas. Too much for a little thing like her.

"You just have to be brave," she says.

My hand settles on my breast, over my heart. Out of the mouths of babes. Something in me wakes and listens.

After a few moments silence, from social necessity I speak again. "We all have things happen to us we have to be brave about."

"Either that or die."

Has it hit her so hard? I feel as if the cobwebs of years are being torn down these days. Things are new or my eyes are new.

I remember the terrible nights and days, how Norah sat beside me stringing out her rosary beads while she thought I slept. I even remember the hot yellow light burning through the blind on my window. And the months afterwards, wandering around the dark house. But to live in the memory of the unbearable, to bring oneself back to the edge of it, no, that's not possible. Time softens.

"It could have been a lot worse," I say. That's what was said to me. The choked gorge I felt when they said it. How could that offence live inside me all this time? And how can I spit it out now on this girl I so love?

She holds her foot in a protective grip. "Yes, I know. Paddy could've been killed and they war might've gone on and the other two boys would have joined up no matter what Mum says."

"And Stephen was lucky," I say. "He wasn't even injured."

"Just his arm. He broke his arm when his horse got shot." She releases her toes and now she cradles her elbow as if it's in pain.

"Have you hurt yourself?"

She looks at me and she seems wretched, her eyes suspiciously moist. Yet she doesn't comprehend my question.

"Your arm." I touch my own elbow in sympathy.

"Oh." She examines her arm as if it's someone else's. "No. It's all right."

"You're probably very tired. It's been a long day for you."

"Thank you for having me, Mrs Greene. It's very kind."

I bump myself forward on the seat, signalling impending withdrawal. "My pleasure, dear. Now, I hope you'll be comfortable in the sleep-out in the back. At least you'll have a breeze, more than I'll have."

I wouldn't mind sleeping out there myself, truly. The day-bed's more than comfortable and it is cooler. I just can't see how I could put her in the guest-room. If Madeleine were to find out that I'd put a shop-girl into the green room, in its gorgeous four-poster!

Her legs seem to be a little stiff as she stands.

"I'll show you," I say and I try to lead the way but Katherine keeps apace with me, an awful kind of trusting in the arm brushing mine. What can I do? I'm the poor cousin here, a relativity that Katherine would little realise. She doesn't even know there's a guest-room anyway.

## Chapter Eleven

**D**ays come when I wake feeling as if a guillotine glints wretchedly over my head and an innocent ring of a doorbell suggests only its imminent drop. It has been like this for too many years. But what on earth am I afraid of now, sitting clenched on the sofa for an hour? My shoulders jumped when I heard it.

I'm not even dressed, lazing around all morning in a stupor, and my hair's down, curling untidily to my waist. I must look a sight. The whip of Madeleine's silk robe about my bare legs gives an efficiency to my walk up the hallway. I can see the outline of a figure through the stained glass panel and I slow. Could it possibly be?

The cool ceramic handle twists under my hand and I feel the lock give. When I pull the front door open, Lev is there with one arm resting against the wall. He's gazing over the array of pots, gardenias and palms and ferns and Heaven knows what she doesn't have there, the profusion of exotica intended to bedazzle and beguile as visitors reach the top of the steps. I gaze at them, too. Leaves have dropped all over the verandah couch. I must gather them up.

My heart thumps like the heart of a bird held in a warm hand. He looks at me, from my dressing gown down to my feet stupidly clad in the heavy black shoes I'd left just inside the door. Better than barefoot, I suppose.

Is he laughing? He says, "Forgive me. I'm too early."

"No, no." I shudder to think he might leave. "Please, come in."

I'm so relieved to close the door behind him, safe inside. He waits for me to lead and I feel shy as a girl, aware of how the robe is loosely wrapped around me. I quietly tug at the two ties, pulling them into a tighter knot at my waist.

"You got there safely last night?" I say over my shoulder.

"Yes, only a little late."

"And it was a good meeting?" He follows me into the parlour where we'd been sitting only a few hours ago.

"Good meeting, yes. We slept only as the birds woke."

“Goodness, you must be tired. Won’t you sit?”

He is more formal than he was yesterday, a slight awkwardness maybe.

“Thank you,” he says and pulls on the knees of his trousers. He doesn’t lean back in the seat but is upright, his arms squared on the rests. “Katherine has not yet risen?”

Is that it? He’s come for Katherine, not for me. I pick up a cushion from the sofa and plump it against my breast as I take my seat. “She’s gone. She had to go to Mass.”

“Ah.” He looks at his shoes. Of course he’s an atheist, like all the Bolsheviks.

And now he leans back, crosses his leg over a knee and I’m surprised at the sudden change in him. I hug the cushion. “Am I disturbing you?” he asks.

“No,” I say and shake my head. I don’t have the breath to say anything else.

In these two days, I’ve become a different person, unrecognisable to myself. I was so shy, shielding myself with a cushion. But when he said, “Come here” in that way, I knew it was what I wanted and in that moment I changed, my whole body moved and oriented itself towards him. He pulled the cushion from my hands as I approached and somehow, awkwardly, I knelt so that I was face to face with him. He touched my cheeks and my eyebrows and ran his finger down my nose, and then I touched him too. Underneath the fall of black hair his forehead was still pale, not burned from the sun but soft, vulnerable. There was a bumpy ridge of red spots hidden there, irritations of heat and sweat, and they made the paleness even more precious to me. I heard my own voice inside me intoning, I’m touching him, I’m touching him. Gentleman that he is, unlike the rude fumblers of my girlhood, he asked permission to kiss my lips and as my mouth felt the gentle, languorous movement of his, the last restraint fell from me and I responded, my hand held his dear head and nothing in the world tied me any longer, no thought or constraint or self-consciousness. I was who I should have been all along.

It seemed to amuse him that I’d decided to do the laundry. If I can wash my stockings and drawers, I can wash sheets. It can’t be so very hard. Though I had to get him to light the fire under the copper this morning before he left for the meatworks. I loved watching him, his beautiful hands as he poked a stick here, adjusted another there, and the secret stretch of tendons and flexing of muscle as he crouched beneath me, the shape of his thighs visible to me now in a familiar way. As he lit the match and the

dried sticks began immediately to crackle, the entire shape of him, the bent head, the wide and shapely shoulders that I'd run my hands over again and again, was mine, truly mine. It seemed at that moment he was part of me, as if the faculty of love in me, so tired and fretful all these years, had manifested itself in this living and unutterably worthy man. And yet nothing like me. How strange it all is, what love turns out to be, an undreamed of country.

Steam rises from the copper and, when the white sheets bubble, my long stick becomes a weapon, attacking those floating incursions. I'm slimed with sweat. The heat in this laundry room is like a Turkish bath but there's something intensely pleasurable about it. Unendurable for the poor laundry-maid, I expect. Perhaps I'll do the washing occasionally when I go home. Not every week of course, but now and then.

Christopher. Nine o'clock now. He'd be walking down the street, or just arrived in his office. Miss Franks may be standing at the locked doors waiting for him and he'd hurry his step as he saw her. The only time she was late was the day her mother died, and even then she turned up to say she had to go home again. He was so embarrassed by the whole procedure of death and its impact that he barely spoke to her for weeks afterwards as they both sat at their desks, she clacking away at her typewriter with tears streaming down her face.

The stick is bleached white at one end. I sit down on the tiny stool, welcome respite I'm sure for the usual incumbent, a place to rest her legs, a moment to wipe her face with the skirt of her apron. The stick, still grasped in my hand, stands upright beside me, my staff.

"You will ruin your hands."

The quiet of the evening doesn't bother me as it had before. We sit in the dark, windows wide open and a full moon heavy in the sky, the night sounds of insects and frogs a little madder than usual. I have gone back to the beginning, a child again, nestling my head against his neck, comfortable on his lap. But not the child I was, never sure of myself, my play dreams often broken by a harsh cry, an annoyed clap of hands. No, as if I'm back in the garden of my grandmother's house, Aberdeen, crawled into the shade of a gardenia bush, pungent, petals silkily browning under my fingers, the air coddling and always warm, and a bee's buzzing just outside my leafy cubby-hole sending me off into a dozy state, a lady-bird's humpbacked climb up a

greening stem all my concentration, its tiny black feet keeping the quick rhythm of another universe, the precise red speckles of its tiny armour glazing my eyes.

Lev's lips nuzzle at my palm. "Hmm?" he says. "Ruin your hands."

I move slightly, slide my feet further between the downy cushions of the sofa. "I don't care. I don't care about anything."

"Nothing?"

The apparition of my old shyness overcomes me like a bad habit but only for a moment and then I lift my head, look in his eyes and say, "Except for one thing." Something in his eyes surprises me, some surprise of his own. And I feel myself withdraw, puzzling on it.

"What?" he says.

I've propped my elbow against his shoulder, distancing him so that I might gain a better perspective of his face. Shaking my head, I try to laugh. "Nothing. Will I make tea?"

"Slippery like an eel. Have you ever caught eel?" He is teasing me but I don't feel at ease suddenly. I shake my head again and the image of the ugly, squirming thing frightens me. "Isabel, don't slip away. We have so little time. Only a few more nights."

I can't bear it. It is that, that is what ruins it.

## Chapter Twelve

“Take my arm.”

**T**My ankle had buckled under me as I stepped down from the tram. My hand snakes between the heat of his body and his elbow, the shirt’s starch-crispness smooth and snappy against my fingers. I starched it myself and ironed it slowly and meticulously. Such a wave of affection swamps me that I nuzzle my face against his shoulder and we walk down the street like this, slowly moving into rhythm. I will be ruined if I’m seen, but I can’t help myself.

I’ve fallen into another world and I’m giddy. The sun glimmers on everything, the shine of the shirt collar when I shift my head by even the smallest degree, on the high windows above balconies and awnings which give such a little relief and are so tiny an attempt under this sky burning white and fathomless. The tram clatters past us, digging its iron wheels into iron tracks. Its windows too, one after another, moisten and glisten so sharply that my eyes begin to water and I’m blinded, dependent on his arm, on the beat of his breath. We stand and wait as it slides by and then we step over the tracks as if they’re hot stones.

The shade, nevertheless, is blessed as we come to the bulk of the Atlas Building, five storeys high, cut on the corner by a double door. A functional building, less embellished than its cohorts on the north side of the river. Solid and sure and purposeful. I like this place. This is where they’ve chosen to be, the hub of the universe.

Is he nervous, too? He’s pulling away from me, guiding me through a quieter side door, his face not quite focused on me. The linoleum is dully polished, and dulls the sound of our footsteps. The staircase is an edifice of darkened wood, winding and rising to some mysterious silence. I’m scared suddenly, my heart betraying me. I don’t want him to know.

He looks upwards through the bird-cage struts and banisters. I sense a change in him. He regrets bringing me, I think. He is an eagle, Lev, still and beautiful and

languid but his eye is always on the gaze, seeing what has not yet arrived, that profound stillness in him only a secretly-working preparation. Has he even forgotten I'm here, two steps behind him? I shouldn't have come, should have stayed in the house peeling potatoes over the stone sink or lying on the sofa watching the shift of the curtain, imagining that as he strode in to meet his comrades he'd be thinking only of me.

The guillotine slices through a sheaf of paper with the most awful glint of blade. Even over the music, the drop and thud is relentless as a toothache. Yuri Abramovich narrows his eyes as he presses down on the handle. He inadvertently grimaces.

I feel quite stupid, stacking leaflets into neat, growing piles on the table, the child given the irrelevant task to perform.

"Madame," Yuri says. He places another thickness of paper on the cutting board, aligning it carefully rather than look over at me. "Perhaps, could you wind?" Then he glances up.

I greet him with only a willing blankness. He jerks his head towards the gramophone. The violin has begun to whine and behind it the entire orchestra creaks like a rocking ship. I find I am laughing. His eyes widen. Because of our language difference, I fall back on charades, list to one foot then over to the other. And he understands, magically as children would. His face changes utterly. He is a jolly, madcap fellow. He too makes an exaggerated sway to one side, lifting the other foot clowningly right off the floor, but then as he sways back to the other side I'm terribly torn between encouragement and doom-laden anxiety. I look at his hand applied to the guillotine handle in a forgetful grasp, his fingers spread on the piled sheets of paper whose ends dangle alarmingly over the block's edge. I wind with a ferocity which is hardly needed. And when I shakily lower the arm and its needle to the revolving record and the music comes out of the horn in a sober return to grandeur, I risk gazing at him again. Happily, he is re-settling his paper, concentration drawing his brow into furrows.

Have I behaved in too silly a fashion? I'm wretchedly overrun by shame, the fire of it prickling along my back-bone, burning in the pit of my belly. I notice a book lying on the sideboard. I pick it up and attempt to make some meaning out of the hieroglyphics on the cover, as if staring hard will render up comprehension. I open out



a page and search for clues. The blade thuds and I hear the rustle of paper as he manhandles another lot to the table.

“It belongs Lev Andreyavich, this book.”

“Oh,” I say and I run my hand slowly across the page.

“Bought in China, Russian bookstall. Many Russians sell their books and other Russians buy.”

“Were you there, too, Yuri?”

“Yes, but not precise time. We were arrested together.”

I lean back against the sideboard. He continues to work, but more easily. He looks up, to see something in my face, perhaps. And perhaps seeing it, he continues. “We were students at university. After a miserable failure of all time to make revolution, police came and took many of us. This is how it was, in Russia.”

“The time wasn’t right,” I say, only parroting what Lev has said to me about it.

He shrugs. “We tried. There has been need for revolution many, many years and it has come. Yes, the time is now right.”

I want to hear the story. I fold the book against my breast and say, “How did you escape?”

“Same as Lev Andreyevich. On train. Oh, they say we were lucky ones. Others went to camps. We jumped off. But then, such a voyage across continent.”

“Snow,” I urge.

“Snow, forever. Forever there was snow, Mrs Greene. But then, I stayed in village for a while, my own sister marries a man there. Lev Andreyavich goes on alone.” He flicks a finger against the stack of paper. He seems to have come to a standstill.

“But you got to China in the end,” I say, quietly. “And finally here.”

He gazes out the window, and then suddenly turns back to me, smiling. “Of course... The book is Pushkin. You know Pushkin?”

“Yes. Well, I know of him, a great writer. I haven’t read anything, I’m afraid.”

“Very romantic fellow, very revolutionary also. He was in exile, also. Internal exile for some time. Loved women very much and freedom.”

“No wonder Lev likes him,” I say and when Yuri looks at me, unsure, I smile.

“Yes, yes,” he says. “Of course. Lev Andreyavich is too romantic, also.”

I know how this old friend of Lev’s sees me. I like him, though. He is warm.

I don't know what Lev was doing for the past forty-five minutes or so and I may not ask, I think. He returned through a different door from the one by which he left. Yuri and I have finished our task and the table is burdened with excruciatingly neat piles of flyers. I can't seem to leave them alone, aligning this stack, shifting that one by half an inch. And really, that is not my nature. I don't know who's most relieved to see him, me or Yuri.

His skin is flushed in a highly-coloured ridge under the eyes and along the cheekbones, and his movements are quicker. His hand sweeps back the black hair. He lays a writing pad on top of one of my piles. It's pencilled over in scrawled script, heavily crossed in places, tiny spider-marks of corrections.

"Is it ready?" Yuri says, strangely enough in English.

Lev, who doesn't even look up from perusing the page, nods. A fair-haired stranger has come in with him whom I vaguely recognise from the march, and two others. The fair man holds out his hand to Yuri and says, "Good to see you." His accent, the light tenor of his voice, causes a shift in the room. The room is not foreign anymore, not bereft of clues. No longer weighty with the disciplined silence under which Yuri and I have spent most of our time together nor painful with the overly intimate romance of the music we'd been playing, which really was too full of private longings. This fair man's voice, the bush cadence, his demeanour, a familiar looseness of limbs, changes the heavy dominance of the furniture, the table which is surely too elegant for its usage as work bench, the bulbously-turned legs of mahogany, the French-polished sideboard which seems to match it. How did they come by such pieces, these Bolsheviks? Carted from the leavings of some restless grandée?

Another of the strangers mutters something which I don't quite hear and his eyes, narrowed by years of sun-glare, stare at me. Lev, releasing himself from the fascination of the writing pad, looks up and his gaze guilelessly finds a spot on the red velvet curtain. He says, "My friend, Isabel." That's all. As a child would be introduced. And also, isn't it clear, as someone whose full name must not be mentioned, someone clandestine? It's intended as a gallantry, I suppose.

The fair-haired man takes off his hat. "How do you do, ma'am," he says. And there's a glance between him and Yuri. I have been revealed, nonetheless. Yet I haven't been told anyone's name.

My cream dress is very light. Something about the shapelessness of this look is too suggestive, paradoxically, the material caught unawares on various

protuberances, loosely following the swellings of the breast, the sudden rise of the buttocks and even, when one walks, the curved outlines of thighs. The stranger continues to stare until, at a signal only he has heard, he relaxes, pulls out a chair and sits down, legs stretched in front of him.

Lev hasn't looked at me. I fold my arms across my chest, too obvious perhaps but it gives me protection and I don't care what they think. Even Yuri has changed towards me. Who do they think they are, that they can make me feel like this? Why do they rate themselves so highly?

And as if I'm no longer here, have vanished or faded into the shadows, the men begin their business. The third man hangs his jacket from a hook by the door. Lev walks up to Yuri and hands him the writing pad, and the fair man, perched on the window sill, peers down into the street.

"Any tea?" he says.

I don't tend to pique and it upsets and offends me to be cornered into such a display. I see dismissal on his face. He's been holding me in the waltz close against him, my forehead occasionally brushing his cheek. Now he stiffens, pulls back. They don't want this from women, do they? They want their dreams met, that's all, and any dropping away from that, mask falling, ragged-edged petticoat showing, and down drums the disdain.

"I didn't say your name, either," he says. "If I'd introduced them, I would have had to say your married name. I was protecting you."

"I know." And I did know at the time, but I can't stop myself. "You made me feel like a ... scarlet woman." I'm ridiculous, he doesn't have to tell me that. And maybe the liquor has loosened my tongue.

He laughs and thankfully I feel the burden of a guilt, whose name I do not know, slide from my shoulders. "Are you my scarlet woman?" he says into my hair and I'm undone again. He lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses my fingers.

The lights are dim, the musicians are burning bows against strings. The air, coming in through the windows thrown wide open to the night, is stained with river smell and is hot and moist. He leans towards my ear and says, "They are trade unionists, Isabel. Sympathisers. They helped me write an article in English."

"Oh. I see."

“Nothing more sinister than that. And they were coming to our dance anyway. We’d agreed to meet beforehand. That is why I had to leave you. I’m sorry.”

And I am sorry. So sorry for causing this dissension. I press my cheek against his jaw, feel the drag of whisker-tips. I want to soothe him now, to make peace between us. His hand warms my back, my spine. The crowd moves in a languid swarm around us and just for a moment I close my eyes. When I open them again I see the young woman, Lucy, her gaze clearly directed on me. She stands against the wall by the door, her husband’s arm about her shoulders. Vershkov is so close, speaking intimately to her, that his dark moustache disappears among her dark hair. And then Vershkov, too, turns his gaze on me.

I glance away. Lev’s hold strengthens about my waist as we circle towards the dais, the garlands of flowers draped in waves across the platform’s wooden wall. The flowers are almost too sweet.

“Lev,” I whisper, and he draws back.

“Who is Lucy?” I say.

I watch his eyes, smiling at first, begin to darken. He does not like intrusion, Lev. But I cannot bear it, always the one who causes doors to close as I approach, voices to lower as I come into a room. I feel so out of sorts. They’ve made me feel out of sorts. And yet I hate to think I’m petulant as I say, “She’s only a child. She’s not any older than Katherine, is she? You handed her all the manuscripts this afternoon, as if she’s in charge.” And I feel again my blush as earlier Lucy had entered the other room all eagerness to greet the men, her hand outstretched to one of the Australians. Then she spotted me. She stopped, stared at me as I was foolishly winding the gramophone, and then turned her back. You shouldn’t be here, she seemed to say.

“She’s very young,” he says at last. “Her father has misgivings also. Perhaps he’s right, I don’t know.” He’s barely moving now.

He’s not like some of the others who are too adamant, too untouched by the changing focus of another’s eyes, a shift of air. He shakes his head as if to clear it of confusion. “For one thing,” he says. “She is fluent in English.”

“So are you.”

“I am good, but she is better, more natural because she was brought up here. We will always be outsiders, always suspicion. It is better to have the home-grown variety, don’t you think?” His neck is warm as I touch it. We’re close again. We’ve been almost still for a few moments as we spoke and now he steps us back into the

sway of the dance and we move among other couples who, like us, are softening as the night grows deeper. His voice murmurs, “Her husband is watched constantly. Everything he does is ambushed, you see. When the authorities closed down the journal we’d published in Russian, we made the decision to bring it out in English instead, change the name. And Lucy would be editor. You see? We get past the law. It makes sense.”

“Is this all you want, Lev?” That is the question, the one that haunts me as I watch him sleep.

He pulls back but this time without rancour. “It is real now. We have taken Russia. I don’t think I ever truly believed it would happen.”

How has he banked everything on this, something he didn’t believe would happen? I rise on my toes, press my cheek to his. I don’t know who he is. I only know I feel such overwhelming passion for him and such fear. I spread my hand wide on his back, feel the heat rise from beneath his shirt. He is a great gift, more than I ever dreamed. His arm pulls me in tighter and he turns us in the dance. I have never danced like this before, so sure, so strong. This moment does not end and had no beginning. We have nothing to do with that anymore. What the world will bring is another thing. But for now there is only this night, the damp air rising from the street, the glitter of glasses, the glisten of stinging alcohol shining on the Russian women’s lips and sliding down their chins and the wildness in the way they toss back their heads as they consume it all in one swallow.

## Chapter Thirteen

*W*e may never have a night like this again. We're children, alive with the incandescent future, and the moon is more a prop-up dangling merrily over our shoulders than a distant globe of rock. Once or twice, when I was quite a young girl, I felt like this, so light-hearted, so giddy with excitement. We sit on the back of a market cart, on wooden benches which the men had carried awkwardly downstairs from the Russian Rooms. The dray, though hastily swept, betrays its origins with a cabbage leaf I've been trying to prise loose from the bench's firm foot, my heel stabbing at it, sliding at it, but it remains there an obstinate testament to the true nature of things.

They're singing now that we've passed another sleep-silenced settlement of houses. The two horses are in no great hurry, clopping casually along the river road, trees tall on either side of us. They're a raucous bunch, these Russians, gayer when they are tipsy with vodka and wine and, how shall I put it, more erotic, more sinuous. They have something in their eyes then that ours never do, and whether it's languor or a fate-accepting abandonment to suffering I can't tell. How strange they must feel among us, the down-to-earth people, the plain-as-day people. I must seem so lacking.

"Where are you?" Lev says. He's turned towards me, the two of us private at the edge of the cart.

"Nowhere," I say. "Just happy enough, riding along, that's all."

"So you don't want to tell me?" His arm is almost too hot around me.

"I have nothing to tell." What does he mean? Is it what I said earlier at the dance, the questions? Does he think I question everything?

"You are happy enough?"

I am trying to avoid his gaze, I don't know why. His knee is pressing against my thigh, his body cutting us off from the others. "Of course," I say.

“You fly away and I don’t know where.”

“I do?” My voice is too loud, perhaps, and my irony a bit too harsh. I glance behind him but the singers are not interested in us, gazing at each other as they recall whatever loss, whatever love they are resurrecting in their throaty words. Lev has stung me. He’s speaking of himself, doesn’t he realise that? For some reason Christopher’s face rises in my mind, and the rounding of his shoulders as he turns and walks away from me.

“I don’t mean to,” I say.

He rubs my back and I suddenly stiffen as straight as a washing board. His hand lifts from me and he says, very quietly, “I thought you’d like us to be in company, not always locked up in the house.”

I nod. I barely know what to say.

“I should not have left you with Yuri Abramovich for so long. I’m sorry.”

“No, he’s nice. I like him. It’s just ... I don’t know what I am in your life.” I look at the moonlight in his eyes and I rise up through creek water, the rain of drops clearing from my hair, my brows, my mouth. This is what it feels like, the clear-sighted relief of saying exactly what one means.

“Me either,” he says.

And I’m confused again. What is he saying?

We are the second drop. Three of them have already jumped off and disappeared up a laneway. The rest must live quite a long way out. The horses’ clop slows as it approaches Madeleine’s front gate. How does the driver know? I didn’t see Lev signal him? And then I understand that he’s the Mercury who brought Lev’s first message to me, the poor, abused foreigner whom Madeleine’s maid complained of as the model of all those ungrateful wretches who land on this shore without the proper grammar to go with it.

Lev lifts me down, hands about my waist, and walks away from me up to the driver. What is his name again? They are all so long and complicated. I pretend more ease than I feel as I bid farewell to our fellow passengers. I haven’t actually uttered another word to them during our entire trip. The lights are out in all the scattered houses of the street. I see a cat, or its shadow, dart out from beneath a bush. It startles me.

Something disturbs the stillness on our verandah, a shadow moving there, too. I feel panic, a dread of robbers. No, of course not. It must be a visit from the debonair Samuel Forsythe, or O'Meara perhaps after a sodden evening at a theatre party. But as I dismiss each suggestion, a surer knowledge settles in my heart and shoots another shaft of panic through me. Just for one moment. Then out of nowhere this cool subterfuge, so unexpectedly available, floods up and takes possession of me. I walk slowly along up to where Lev stands speaking quietly to the driver. He hasn't noticed the intruder. In the moon's light, I make out the smile on his face as he welcomes me, his arm rising to encircle me.

"Lev," I murmur. "My husband is here."

The smile fades and he turns his face to the house.

"On the verandah," I say. "You'd better go."

In the silence I hear him catch his breath. Have I said it wrong, tactlessly? Yet he must leave and quickly. Christopher is not quite as foolish as all that; he seems always to await my final treachery. Who am I, that I could create such catastrophe?

"When?" he says.

I shake my head. "A few days, perhaps."

The look I see in his eyes scorches me. Perhaps I mistake it. It's dark, after all. He touches the horse's twitching rump with stilted affection and climbs up beside the driver. He says nothing more to me. I feel exactly as I've felt when Christopher walks away, hurt by me in a way I can't understand. It angers me, all this sensitivity. What have I ever done? I hear him say something in Russian and instantly the reins come down on the heavy-footed beasts. The dray moves forward and I'm left defenceless on the roadway.

A dog barks. Perhaps it's me who's distressed him. More likely the culprit is a snake crackling through the summer grass or perhaps a nosey possum investigating the chipped plate the dog has inherited, sniffing and pawing at potato leavings. A dog's bark is a lonely thing, biting into the night.

The cart turns at the end of the road and I'm alone except for the lanky figure moving like a moth between the blackened shapes of fanned palms.

Sickeningly I recall how, as I strung wet sheets on the clothes line a few days ago, the woman who lives next door peered over her back porch, hiding behind a pillar, spying. I caught a glimpse of her as I straightened up from the wicker laundry basket on the dusty ground and she boldly stared back before walking inside. How



many others have seen Lev arrive at Madeleine's door as dusk fell and leave in the early morning? And did that neighbour march straight to her desk, briskly dip her pen in the inkpot and write a letter to Madeleine? And Madeleine, how well I know her, would be enflamed into a state of indignation and delighted prurience, of concern for my mental health and Christopher's rights as the husband she'd never managed to land herself. Oh yes, I picture it, she'd let out a few shrieks as she read the poison thing, and pound up and down the wide hallway of our grandmother's house. I can just see Susan, her stiff maid's bonnet beginning to wilt in the afternoon, consumed with curiosity herself yet privately raising her eyes to Heaven at the performance of her impetuous mistress. Maddie's voice rises and the excitement rises and the two of them would be there under the high, pale ceiling deciding my fate. Yes, she's told Christopher.

My hands shake as I close the garden gate behind me, slide the lock into place. I feel his presence. My shoes ring on the stone of the pathway. The strong, sweet smell of gardenia is overpowering in the heat of the night, too sweet and betraying. I can't look at him. My legs are heavy as I tread slowly up the steps. I'm tired. I haven't slept a full night's sleep since it began.

My breath sounds through my nostrils as I reach the verandah and I feel faint. His boots move.

"Mrs Greene," the voice says.

"God!" Oh, God, foolish and alone, what have I done? The figure, unknown now and terrifying, comes towards me. A soldier, a gaunt-faced ghost. I hold my hands to my stomach.

"Mrs Greene," the soldier repeats. "It's me. Paddy Martin."

I am mothering him. What else can I do? The glass is almost empty and a moustache of milk lines his top lip. "More?" I say, and before he answers I'm pouring a frothy stream from the jug. I should have more food in the house. His little finger, an uncanny paleness, is held out almost straight as he grips an untidily-cut slice of bread, the butter poking through a hole, hunks of cheese piled on so thick he has to aim his mouth around it.

"What's his father have to say about this?"

He shakes his head. "Stephen doesn't care what anybody thinks. My sister reckons he's got ideas from some Russian captain he met over there. Can't stop talking about him."

"A Russian?" I lower myself into a kitchen chair.

"I know what I'd do with 'em." His left cheek bulges as he chews.

I pick up the cheese knife and slice at the dark yellow block. A thin shaving drops to the wooden board. The cheese is rough, reeking of dry grasses.

"Wasn't for them, we'd 'a been home a year ago, more than likely."

The light burning down here in the basement kitchen is too bare, no drapes on windows to soak it up or cedar buffed to watery pools where it could reflect itself and tumble and move. We sit in its lonely glare. He is angry, Paddy. When he swallows, his eyes narrow and his forehead creases as if his throat is raw.

"Where did he meet this Russian?" I finally manage to say.

"Paris. After he got his arm patched up. So I believe, anyway." He sips carefully at his cold milk as though it's steaming hot. "He's always been like that. He'd believe anything. He's got his head filled with nonsense. He thinks he's a socialist or a Bolshevik or some fool thing."

"Maybe he agrees with it," I say. "Maybe he wants things to improve for people."

"Let him start improving things at home. He's not improving things for my sister. What about Mary and the baby? Bundling them up like a knapsack and tramping off with them into a shanty in the middle of the bush. Mary's never had anything up till now, till she got married to that idiot and moved up across the border and finally had a nice house. And a good business. All right for him, come home from the war and decide to just pack it all in. Out of spite if you ask me. Too bloody spoiled, that's what's wrong with him. Excuse the language, Mrs Greene."

I nod my pardon. Wrong of me to question him like this. He needs to calm down. He reaches for his slice of bread again, discarded on a cracked plate. I should have got out a better one.

"If he goes ahead like he wants to and moves them out of that house in Toowoomba, I'll never forgive him. The bloody place he wants to shift to, there's nothing bloody there!" He tears the bread. He's a good boy, Paddy. He took over the reins with the younger ones when their father left. Stepped up and decided that for

himself. He won't let anyone harm them. I wish I had some cold mutton he could have.

"She's the one kept his bloody business going while he was away." He's starting off again. He might even be feverish. "Who does he think did it? His father wasn't going up there on the train every week, had his other interests to take care of." He bends as if to bite off a piece and then hesitates. "Let him go off and live in a humpy if he wants, leave Mary out of it."

"Well, his father won't approve of this move," I say.

"Think he could care less what his father thinks? It's because his father gave him the business in the first place, if you ask me. Too easy for him. Set the blighter up in a nice little deal, buys him a house, hands him the key to the door. That's why he doesn't care about it. What does he know about the poor? So bloody concerned about his poor. Silly bugger."

He gazes at me from under his lashes. He used to have the most wonderful eyes, blue, sharp as diamonds, like his own father. They're different now, stained with milky-yellow, sliding away from the direct gaze.

"How is Mary?" I say, lightly.

"Packing." He's holding out his little finger again. It's trembling. He can't seem to manage the bread. "She's got stuff all over the house. She wasn't expecting me. Thought I was him, I think, when I knocked. No point my staying on there, waiting, with him up here in Brisbane knocking about somewhere. So I just got back on the train this morning and came on up."

"Well, it was good you dropped in to see her. That must have been nice for her."

He scratches the crown of his black head as he eats, almost unaware of me. He should have remained there with her, helped her, if he was so concerned. More interested in catching up with Stephen, if you ask me. I say, "And you've no idea where he is. Mary didn't know?"

He wipes at his mouth but a crumb adheres to his top lip anyway. I want to brush it off. I join my hands on the table.

"She presumed he'd drop in to see Katherine at some point."

"But the landlady said Katherine's already gone?"

"Seemingly she left yesterday. Must have just missed her. I thought she'd be working on Christmas Eve. I know Mum's not expecting her till tomorrow."

“Oh, well.”

Norah Martin must be distraught. I don't for a minute think she's happy about this, Patrick taking off for Brisbane two minutes after he arrived home, but at least she'd presume Katherine would take care of him. Find him a room in the boarding house, perhaps. His wrist is so bone-thin it scares me. I slide my hand across and almost encircle it. “I'm only glad your mother thought to give you my address. Heaven knows what would have happened.”

“I'd 'a been all right. I'll find Steve tomorrow.”

“It's a big town, Paddy. You won't just come across him like that.”

“I'll find him. I'll ask the boys in the bars. They'll know.”

“Well.” I pat his hand as if I have some authority. “We'll talk about that in the morning. Let me go upstairs and get your room ready. You finish your supper.”

The feet of my chair scratch the flagstones and I wince and he winces. But he picks up his glass and drains it.

None of it happened as I imagined, not the prying neighbour nor Madeleine scratching out a venomous letter to Christopher. But what if I hadn't seen Paddy's dark figure on the verandah, what if Lev had come to the door with me as he'd intended, his arm about me? What if he'd used the spare key I'd given him, switched on the light inside the hall? And the cart already gone and no way for him to leave, to pretend casual acquaintance? I can barely move. I have been on the edge of a precipice and so nearly fallen.

The green room is warm, rotting in the torrid heat behind its closed door. I need to open the window to air the place. And I turn down the bed. Let Madeleine look askance at an injured war hero using her best guest-room.

## Chapter Fourteen

**I**'ve had the most dreadful night. Paddy coughed so much I was worried he'd choke. When I did manage to doze off, I woke again with my heart thumping. I saw their faces in my dreams, that awful Australian union man leering at me as he sat on the window ledge, and Lucy whispering in her husband's ear as Lev and I danced past them. I am so humiliated. What came over me, that I let myself end up in this position? Another one of his women, gazing up into his eyes like a love-sick pup, that's what they were thinking, and this one so pale and insipid! Oh, God, I'm so ashamed.

This room is stifling. I kick back the twisted sheet. The blood is throbbing behind my eyes; I'm going to have a woeful headache before long. If only I could breathe!

There he is again, hacking his lungs out. Poor Paddy. He is my concern at the moment, not any other silly thing. Should I slip into my robe and tip-toe to his door, see if he wants something, a glass of water, or a cup of tea? Or search through Madeleine's medicine cupboard for a bottle of rub; though the prospect of applying it makes me hesitate, unbuttoning his night-shirt if he even has one, fingering the sticky stuff over his young chest, no, I couldn't do it. Something slightly improper about it.

I hope he's not getting this 'Flu they're talking about. He shouldn't be up here at all. Why would Norah Martin give him this address unless she wants me to pack him off home again? Of course she does.

Of course she does. The wardrobe door has swung open in the night. My dresses hang quietly in the gloom, patiently imbibing the cedar-wood fragrance. I sit up in the bed, dizzy. My feet tingle as I stand but the bare floorboards are cool, soothing, like the cool grass high in the Tablelands. The oval mirror inside the wardrobe door refuses glare this morning. I appear in it like a shadow. My hair's tangled from sweat and the dirt of town yesterday. And from Lev's fingers.

The cab-driver is going too fast, the wheels careening into pot holes and bumping over stones as if it's he who has to catch a train. Probably wants to go home for his lunch. The rest of the world is leisurely today, strolling along pathways dressed for church, swinging picnic baskets, fishermen strung out along the river banks, their rods bending with the force of the current. It's only us in the mad rush, the horses' hooves clouding the dust, leather and wood and metal creaking with an embarrassment of discord. Some of them stand and stare at us, lift a hat, puzzled, wondering where on earth we could be going in such a hurry on this peaceful Sunday morning.

I'm nervous. What shall I say? It seemed so clear in the early hours as I lay listening to Paddy expurgating his poor lungs. And now I feel tempted to get on the train and not leave any message at all. Let Lev believe what he likes.

Paddy is sullen, like a little boy. I've bullied him. Over those years away overseas, he seems to have developed an addiction to constant movement. What's chasing him?

Bells are tolling the hour. The crowds are out in the city streets, families window-shopping, gentlemen loitering in the middle of the road talking to passing acquaintances.

The cab waits as I trundle Paddy into the station dining room, seat him at a table beside a dimly-lit wall. There's a fan circling directly overhead. He's unhappy with the ten shilling note I slide under the bread plate. But I've told him already that this is my shout. It will keep him there till I return. Even a young man who's not himself can't resist a plate of mutton and gravied potato. I won't be long. The boarding house is only a few minutes away.

I hand up a sandwich of cold roast beef to the cab-driver before I climb back in. His eyes smile. That will keep him waiting, too, pleasantly idling in the shade of the overhanging tree outside Lev's place.

The landlady, after she answered my knock, turns and wanders back to her chair in the front room, her newspaper trailing in her hand beside her. I walk down the hallway as he waits, his arms opening out. Is it a trick of the light? Have I caught him unawares in a moment of happiness quite distinct from me? His face is bright with it.

"I wasn't sure you'd be back yet," I say.

He pulls me inside, closes his door.

“The landlady,” I say.

“Don’t worry.” He places his palms against my cheeks. His skin is warm and the sweet smell I know so well comes up from his hands, his wrists. “Where is he?”

It takes me a moment before I understand. As I look into his eyes, so earnest, so concerned, I realise how easily I could lie. Easy solution, no need for the convolutions of explanations I’ve been rehearsing. I must go home with my husband, I could say, only for a while, don’t fret. Except I can’t say that because of Katherine. What if Katherine, when she comes back here after Christmas, happens to recount how I returned her brother Paddy home after he’d run off to Brisbane? What would Lev think then?

“What is it?” he says.

I’m captured in his grip, can barely move my head. I see the bone under his skin, the protrusions that distinguish him as foreign. He turns my face with the slightest force of his fingers till I gaze into his eyes. “What is it?” he repeats.

I burrow my mouth into the heat of his palm and kiss it pathetically, and in this way I make my escape. His hands drop, defeated. I look around the room. His bed is only half-made, as if he couldn’t decide if he was up or not. Has he been lying there all morning?

“It wasn’t my husband. Last night, it wasn’t him after all. It was Katherine’s brother.” I can’t look at him. The sun, streaming in through the window, edges his white shirt, the angle of his elbow.

“The soldier?”

“Yes, he came and now ...” I shrug as if fate has taken me by the collar. “He’s not at all well. He has no right to be up here by himself, when his mother is so worried about him.”

“Maybe he’s restless.”

“That’s all very well. He’ll just have to stop that. He has to learn to pull himself together. And go home and stay there.”

He moves away from me, wary, and picks up a bruised apple from the bureau. He holds it tight while he studies the faded rug on the floor.

“He has a terrible cough,” I say.

“Does he have the ‘Flu?”

“He tells me not. He says the doctors reckon it’s because of this gas he breathed in.”

“He is certain of this? If it’s the ‘Flu, Isabel, you must not be near him. It could kill you.”

“Of course we’re sure. The doctors in England when he was in hospital and then the Australian ones here when he got off the ship, they all told him it was very definitely not influenza.” I am lecturing him as if he’s a child. I’m angry and why wouldn’t I be? He stands there tall and fragranced with musk from his night’s sleep. He does it all so lightly, thoughtlessly.

“You are upset,” he says. “You were upset last night.”

“About what?”

He won’t lift his gaze from the floor, I notice. Guilty, I presume.

“I have no choice here, Lev. I have to take Paddy home, that’s all.”

He slowly shakes his head and I feel a kind of triumph. Some right balance has restored itself. I can feel it. My shoulders straighten. I soften my voice though to say, “Anyway, you have things to do, I have things to do. I do have a home to run, you know.”

He puts the apple back down on the bureau. It rolls towards the upturned clothes brush and we both watch it. It comes to a halt by the wooden base.

“I see,” he says.

The doors of the railway station seem more the entrance to a cathedral, where there is neither night nor day. My steps slow as if I’m walking against an incoming tide. In the distance, Katherine appears like a miracle.

She’s standing beside her brother on the platform, just outside the dining hall. The light is hazy and their shapes leak into the watery air around them. I almost wonder if I imagine her. As I approach, she becomes more defined, both of them silent, each staring in different directions, the world of the railway station moving around them and they themselves terribly still. Neither sees me. I come up to them as one more passing figure. Paddy realises first but he merely adjusts his shoulders. Katherine’s eyes are strange, filmed, heated and when she turns she looks at me with defiance.

“Where did you spring from?” I say, jauntily. The air must be lifted. I can’t bear this sort of thing.

“She was at the boarding house all along,” Paddy says. “Just stepped out to see a girlfriend when I came by last night. It was bad timing.”



“Oh?” I say.

Her neck reddens and the flame rises up over her cheeks. Yet Lev has just told me Katherine left two days ago. She won't catch my eye.

“Well,” I say. “We'd better get on board or we'll be left behind.”

Paddy picks up my travelling case which I'd left in his charge and throws his own duffel bag over his shoulder. I wish he wouldn't. He's not well enough for such courtesies. But his eyes tell me to step back. He, too, is defiant. He heads off and we follow him, Katherine and I, quite awkward with one another.

I'm travelling so fast I don't know where I'm going. The window frames epileptic flashes, clothes hanging on a back line, a foolish pair of red long-johns flapping in the wake of our breeze, the blur of a cow's tail rising to shoo away a blue-bottle. I feel enclosed on myself. We've barely said a word.

Katherine sits opposite me, staring out too, whether at the passing parade or her own glassy reflection, I don't know. Her eyes move constantly. Why did she lie?

## Chapter Fifteen

**I** shouldn't have brought Paddy home. If the 'Flu is coming up from the south, I may have done him terrible harm, dragging him back down here again. What if he catches it, in his weakened state? We were wrong to laugh about it. I've had a cough for weeks, a pressure of some kind on my chest. I don't believe I have it but I don't feel well either. How long does it take to creep up on you?

And now they've stopped the trains from going over the border and absolutely nobody is allowed to cross without a couple of weeks spent in quarantine. I couldn't go up to Brisbane again even if I wanted to. What will I do?

My knuckles are sore from rubbing at the washboard and this pillowcase is greasy with soaping, slipping and sliding under my hands. I seem to have caused a pool of water to flood under my feet and the front of my skirt is damp, too. Beside me, the copper begins to boil and breathe steam into the air. The laundry shed is as hot and damp as a Brisbane afternoon.

"Mrs Greene, I've done the lunch."

I turn my head stiffly. Mabel's coming across the grass.

"It's all in the oven, so I'll finish off those sheets," she says. Her voice becomes intimate as she arrives in the doorway.

"I can manage, Mabel. Nearly done, anyway. You go on home, if you want to." I wipe loose strands of hair from my forehead. Her sleeves are already folded up, prepared. The pinkish fat of her arms has a kind of charm, an allurements. How solid and soft at once she is, almost unvanquishable.

"I'll give you a hand." She marches towards me, her stained white apron folding into the curves of her skirt.

"Oh, no, Mabel, you've got your own crowd to take care of. You're up to your elbows." I can't bear to be unfair to her. Christopher doesn't pay her to cook and clean for unexpected guests like this, and she's taken two of the stranded train passengers into her own home. It's not right she washes for mine as well.

“Shove over,” she says. It pleases me tremendously that she would talk to me like that.

She adds, “Mrs Greene.”

I plunge the pillowcase into cold water. Mabel is deft, not like me. She works the whitened washing stick under the pair of sheets bubbling in the copper and steam clouds, thickens. “No sign of my mob going back down south,” she says.

“Our fellow had a home to go back to this morning, that’s the difference. He said he’ll leave it till all this blows over,” I say. “The New South Wales people don’t really have to travel, do they? They’re better off waiting. Heaven knows how long the poor Queensland ones will be stuck. They have to get home some time. Careful, dear, I just want to throw this in with the sheets.” She seems to move further back than is necessary as I drop the dripping pillowcase in on top of the sheets. It’s important to boil everything, they say.

“At least you done your bit,” she says.

“Oh, I’ll go down to the School of Arts and see if there’s anyone else might need a bed.” I am keen. I want to exhaust myself like she does, and the others. I duck my head to my sleeve, wipe at the sweat sweetly irritating me, threatening to roll down from my eyebrow. I feel like someone else, someone of purpose in the world.

“Well, I’ve news for you,” she says. “The postie just dropped in a package for Mr Greene, and he told me there’s a new lot just arrived in on the train. About a hundred and fifty of them.”

“What?” I’m explosive in my vehemence as I imagine I’m supposed to be. I follow Mabel’s lead, listen to the shades of her language, smell out her particular positioning. She so easily affords a commentary on the whole, Mabel, sitting up there in the gods.

“We’ll be overrun next,” she says, satisfied with my enthusiasm. “Gawd knows how many of ’em ’ll turn up for us to take care of. We’ll have the whole bloomin’ state of Queensland sleeping in our parlours.”

“Poor blighters,” I say, for I don’t want us to turn against the woe-begotten travellers, either. “They just want to get home.”

“Poor blighters,” she agrees. “Not their fault. But they shouldn’a got on the blinky train in the first place, if they knew the border was closed. ’Course, they didn’t know when they started out, I suppose. Let me lift these sheets out. Do you want to clear that line out there?” she says.

“I meant to do that before,” I say quickly before she can retract the implied order and offer to do it herself.

I step outside. The noon bells from the chapel begin to ring. This is the time of day Norah Martin stops whatever she’s doing, crosses herself, makes tiny movements with her lips, hisses sibilants like a dying insect; mumbo-jumbo, Christopher calls it. The pear tree and the apple tree are in full greenery, heavy with thought of coming fruit. The grass is wild, too, dryly breaking under my bare feet. I’m a peasant out here, plucking pegs off the cord strung from a branch to a fence post, tossing each sun-smelted towel and wash-cloth over my shoulder. The day is truly silenced by those bells, and by this powerful intensity of light that holds me and the trees and Mabel, too, as she bends and rises at the stone sink, bends and rises. This is how it is in the old countries, peasants in the field, the quiet, holy moment as they cease labour. Can they till their fields, the people in Europe? Or has it all gone? The boys would know, among the other things they know and don’t say.

What is he doing, poking his head out from my sitting room door like a naughty schoolboy? He must have been peering through the window as I pegged the guest-room sheets and pillowcases on the washing line. My sitting room is my personal domain, I thought that was understood.

“Isabel,” he shouts. Shouts! If he thinks he’s going to intimidate me, he may think again.

I wipe my hands on the towel at the back door. The pads of my fingers are wrinkled as prunes from immersion in the cold water and a sliver of skin has come loose from a cuticle. I smooth it down with my thumb. That could catch on something, my stockings perhaps.

“Isabel! Are you there?”

I lean my head and gaze up the darkened hallway. Christopher stands there with a fist on his hip. You would think it a crime to wash one’s own linen, honestly you would.

“Yes,” I reply languidly.

“Can I see you up here?”

“Very well,” I say quietly and he may have heard me or not. I slowly reach behind my back and loosen the ties of Mabel’s white apron, slip the halter-neck strings over my head. I should lay it out carefully over a chair so it may dry. Save

washing it. There's a damp patch across the waist and a few splatters on the bodice. My dress is a trifle wet, too. I've let the apron's ties dangle on the floor. I scoop them up and arrange them neatly over the wooden back of a chair and then I walk into the hallway.

He has disappeared and my sitting room door has been closed. I presume this is to be taken as a sign of his displeasure. What does he expect me to do, search for him? I tread quietly. His study door is ajar. I push it softly and ready myself for the altercation.

The door swings back further than I intended, whines on its hinges. The velvet curtains are draped perfectly at either end of the bow window and sun streams in through the lace. The dark walnut of the desk and the gilt-edged mirror over the fireplace glint knowingly in the filtered light. The room is empty and unexpectedly peaceful. A neat pile of letters sits under the weight of a heavy-based figurine. Apart from that, his desk is clear, the blotter marked with the contrary shapes of his signature, the faded outlines of past sentences.

He is waiting behind me as I turn to leave.

Startled, I say, "Please don't start, Christopher."

"Can you just come into your sitting room for a moment?" he asks and gestures towards my door.

Am I to be lectured like a child? I stand unmoving. I can hear him breathing as if he's more than exercised. There's a flush to his cheeks. He looks down at me as though he's about to speak and then he surrenders and takes the first step, wheels about into the hall and through to my room. I glance at myself in the mirror, stroke damp strands of hair up into the bun, and follow him.

I say as I walk in, "Mabel has two of the people staying in her house."

He turns to face me. I can't remember the last time I actually invited him in here. He smiles.

"So I believe."

"There isn't a home in the district, rich or poor, which hasn't taken in some unfortunate from the train."

He opens his hands and looks over my head as if there might be someone there who could explain a puzzlement to him. "I'm well aware of that," he says. "I've been at a meeting about the crisis all morning."

“I see.” I have a frog in my throat. I swallow to clear it. “I hadn’t realised,” I say, hoarse, and I cough. “But since the sheets need to be boiled immediately and poor Mabel is struggling herself, I see no harm whatever in doing it myself. After all, that’s how the germs spread.”

“We could afford to have three or four girls as live-in maids, I’ve told you that a hundred times. I do quite well, these days.”

“Look, please Christopher. You know I don’t want people around the house all the time. And quite truly, it’s pointless. There’s only the two of us, after all.”

The smile that has lightened his face seems to crumble away and his eyes close for a moment. I have touched the raw nerve. I hadn’t meant to. He turns his head and gazes out the window at the white sheets sailing in the warm breeze. I say, trying to placate, “I hope he didn’t disturb you, that man.”

He sighs, and shakes his head. “You mistake me, Isabel. As for the gentleman salesman, I saw him for two minutes this morning, that’s all, on my way out the door. He mentioned he was catching a coach back down to Armidale and suggested a horse I might like to back, whose name escapes me.”

“Well, as long as he didn’t inconvenience you,” I say. “He was very quiet.”

“Other arrangements have been made, in any case. We can’t have quarantined people mixing with the town like this. It’s absurd.” He’s shifted his gaze to the sleeve of my blouse.

I begin to unroll it. “Yes. I was thinking that,” I say and I struggle with the button, trying to thumb it through the hole.

“Anyone who’s been in Sydney, or Melbourne, anywhere there’s a port where the returning troops are sailing in. They’re immediately suspect.”

“Our man wasn’t.”

“No, I know that. Anyhow, we’ll probably put them up in the Showground, that’s the thinking, until some better plan is made.”

“Well, then,” I say.

“Well, then,” he says. He suddenly steps to one side.

My eyes follow him but he points to the corner of the room. There is a gramophone perched on my escritoire, its horn opening out towards me. “What is it?” I say, quite stupidly.

“A gramophone. It arrived in on the train today. I ordered it up from Sydney for you, just after you came home.”

For some perverse reason, he's happy lately. And now this evening, like a boy, walking back down the street and reaching the rolled newspaper over his head to whack at a branch. Leaves twist in the darkening air, cluster about his shoulders as they fall and a bat, rudely ruptured from his hold, flits away behind him. He doesn't see me, I think. I release the blind and close the curtain over. It's time to light the lamp but I can't find the energy.

The bed sags as I sit. What am I going to do? I've trapped myself. And even the bedroom isn't mine anymore. If he comes in again tonight, hopeful, grateful, I don't know how I'll endure it.

There's the front door. He'll be looking around for me. Perhaps he'll assume I've gone out since there's no light on up here. If only there were somewhere to go tonight, another ladies' meeting in the School of Arts or the church hall. We've been so busy, all of us, organising food for the poor train people locked up in the Showground pavilion, gathering together little treats for the children. It has been marvellous. I wish I could go with them, when they all leave tomorrow.

I suppose I'll have to join him for supper; it would be unkind not to. More truly, it would open up a can of worms. Perhaps life is better this way, this truce between us. If I could remain calm, we would have at least some degree of peace. After all, there's no choice, is there?

I open my door. The glow of lamps has lit up the house and I hear music, the swell of an orchestra. He's been in my sitting room again. Nothing is inviolate. Months ago, he wouldn't enter in there without my permission, and it was a rare occurrence that he even he'd even wish to. I don't know, perhaps that was the better way.

"Is that you, Iz?"

I try to raise my voice. "Yes," I reply, as if it could possibly be someone else.

I don't care for Haydn. I don't care for any of the recordings he ordered for me. I'd prefer something French, or Russian. Something passionate, sensuous.

"A bit of excitement downtown earlier."

"Oh, yes?" I turn at the bottom of the stairs. He's gone into the dining room, sitting there with one leg thrown over the other, opening his paper up with a great deal of fussy care, folding the broadsheet so he can hold it in one hand. I wish he wouldn't ritualise everything.

“Some young fool trying to slip across the border.” His voice mellows as I come in.

“Oh, no. Who was it?”

Mabel has already laid the table, the silver sharply glowing from her monthly polish. I pick up the vase of sickly-smelling flowers, carry them over to the sideboard. It’s so lonely, that table, the two of us night after night.

“You wouldn’t know him, some stranger just in. The fellow high-tailed it up here when he got off his ship in Sydney, though they’ve been told the border’s quarantined. The law doesn’t apply to them, apparently.”

“Oh, well.” It makes me recoil, when he talks like that, so harsh, unforgiving.

“What they don’t understand, these fellows, is they are the ones bringing this ’Flu into the country in the first place. If they don’t adhere to the quarantine, we all suffer. Look what’s happened in America. Millions have died. It’s no laughing matter.” He holds the paper up in front of his face.

He can feel my censure. We will never see eye to eye. He’ll judge me, and I’ll judge him. That is our destiny, Christopher and I.

“Anyway,” he says after a moment. “We got him. He’d taken a horse and tried to get down through the gorge. We sent a few men after him.”

I move the salt and pepper a few inches on the linen cloth. I’d be better off leaving the room, going down to the kitchen to take the plates of cold meat salads from the icebox. But instead I say, as I smooth my hand across the tablecloth, “I presume he was trying to get home.”

“Yes, believe so.” I hear the paper shake open. “That’s not an excuse, Iz. He’s been away overseas for three years, according to him. He could afford to wait another fortnight. He’ll have to go through the same procedure as everybody else. They’re setting up a very nice quarantine camp just across the border, tents and cooking facilities. Baths and so on. Rather a good job.”

“Still,” I say.

The recording has finished. I can hear the hiss of the circling needle in the other room. I look at him. He’s pretending he doesn’t notice. He’s offended. Christopher is not a cruel man. Do I make him behave more harshly than he really is? Sometimes I believe I do.

“What’s for tea, do you know?” he says.



## Chapter Sixteen

I barely slept last night, dreading today when all this quarantine business will move up the track and we'll be left behind. What will we do now? Christopher's been aflame for the last two weeks, rushing to meetings with other town elders, to late-night debates with his cronies. He can barely contain his excitement. I've been as bad. So were we all. We've had purpose. We've shared the world's concerns, been a centre of it indeed. They say there's a photographer up from one of the Sydney papers. Apparently he arrived late last night in a motor-car, wearing a gauze mask over his nose and mouth, according to Mabel. At least we haven't got that bad yet.

I have a hole in my stocking, just behind the knee. I don't think it will show. Not much I can do, since I haven't another clean pair. That's the trouble with washing your own smalls.

I have such a dread in my stomach. Tomorrow, tonight even, how will we keep this up? Normal life. If only he hadn't asked me to accompany him, to stand by his side today, suddenly become the cheery wife I've quite signally failed to be all these long years. I can hardly find the energy to put my foot into the second stocking. All I want to do is sit here on the bed all day. That irritated way he slammed the front door when he left a few minutes ago – he knows very well how I'm feeling, how near the edge we are, no matter what light-heartedness he pretends. I could just not turn up, I suppose.

There's a trombone trotting along beside me, late too. Rupert Wilson, poor old fellow, wheezing up the street with the thing gripped in his right hand, is so perturbed by his tardiness that he barely notices me. Luckily, for Rupert at any rate, the big drum is pelting down the hill towards us, similarly late. It's a wonder it doesn't do the chap some damage, heaving up and down against him like that. It looks like we three are fated to meet up at the crossroads. I can't help but laugh. It's all so incongruous.

We all turn together. I think I'll slow and let them get ahead of me. In the distance I see a sulkey rattling over the creek bridge and, further down, a carriage bumps its way across the railway track. They've streamed in from all over the district to say goodbye to the quarantined who have taken on a new mantle. I see the poor things now, lined up inside the gates, all their luggage with them. They seemed so fearsome a few days ago, laden with doom. And now we're about to break our hearts at their going, unable at the last to loose our grip. You'd think we'd have something better to do. There must be hundreds of us, packed on the dirt road and under the trees of the paddock. Everyone's dressed up, even a top hat or two. Oh yes, there he is, standing with the nobs, of course, their ladies with raised parasols and enormous hats. If he weren't so tall, he might never see me. He's gazing around the crowd and spots me.

Shall I pretend I haven't seen him? He jerks his head, subtly, gesturing me over. I am too far away. I shrug my shoulders. The woman in front of me, what is her name, from an outlying farm, raises her arm to fight with her hat's net, a bird's nest of holes and ladders. She reeks of unwashed sweat. Perhaps she was up early, milking the cows, carrying chopped wood in her thick arms. I pull back just as her gaze falls on me. I hope she doesn't realise I was rudely propelled because of her odour. Her eyes question me and I try to smile.

"Good crowd," I begin to say.

She is thrusting her chin, defiant. "Snob," I hear her say to the red-faced man beside her. He's embarrassed, from the looks. He sidles a glance at me.

I feel as if my face has been slapped. I move away, begin to circle the outer ring of the crowd. Christopher's gaze keeps following me. I hope I never see that woman again. I knew I shouldn't have come down today.

Thank God, there's Norah Martin, also lately arrived from the looks. She's parked herself under the shade of a tree. I glance towards Christopher. The woman beside him has engaged him in conversation. He bends his head to her. He quite likes Maisie Cooper. She's the kind of woman he credits with all kinds of glories – abounding with advice which she invariably prefaces with how exceptional it is that she would give any, and so willing to step in, to organise committees and see to the garland decorations in the School of Arts. If that's the kind of woman he wants, he can have her.

Suddenly, a band strikes up. Not ours, surely. I can just see a baton rising in the air, its brass top polished to a yellowed gleam. The trumpets and the drums roll into the tune and I feel the excitement jump from one spectator to the next, an electric charge. Like a wave the crowd breaks apart, Norah Martin on one side of the widening path and Christopher too. And me stranded on the other. The gates have been opened.

The quarantined musicians are leading the procession. They really are so good. No wonder they won the national competition, poor dears, and then captured at the border and slung into our Pavilion while their own townspeople waited a hundred miles or so away for their victorious return; red and white bunting probably come loose from gables by now, and beer kegs returned to the public houses. They are marching in a slow stride, trombones all at a precise angle, cymbals catching the sun as they play *Johnny Comes Marching Home*. I wonder which wag thought of that; hardly the leader who looks very self-important, no, I wouldn't think he'd have the humour.

Christopher seems to be pinned against the pavilion fence as the crowd attempts to flatten itself out. Thank goodness I didn't go over. Women have produced white handkerchiefs, wave them in time with the music, and men all around me are lifting their hats in salute. Behind the band, the rest of the fraternity of inmates also march along, swinging their arms if they can, though a few are too heavily burdened with baggage. I see one fellow who is in no mood for celebration, apparently, a suitcase in each hand, his hat sliding back on his oiled hair, his collar button missing and his big neck almost obscene between the two bulging fronts of his shirt. His tie has slipped around to the side, almost on his shoulder.

We are meant to gather at the end of the parade but our young have broken loose already and run along beside them. No one can resist now, it seems. Oh, dear, poor Christopher is being swept along whether he likes it or not. He gazes behind as he's manhandled down the road.

I simply walk away. The remnants of our local brass band tag miserably by the tail-coats of the procession, the drummer clattering his sticks against the skin every now and then. Mrs Martin has not moved. I glance at her and she slowly walks up towards me. I wait in a puddle of poplar leaves.

"That's over," she says.

It seems so quiet, despite the trails of uproar moving away from us towards the west.

“Any word of Mary and Stephen?” I say, and we begin to walk through the paddock, over the brown grass. A cockatoo arrows above our heads, its white body a worrying weight of light.

“Ach,” she says, spits it almost.

“The move still on?”

She breathes out in an audible sigh. “I don’t know. I thought she’d be all right from here in. But now, the way he’s carrying on. He should never have married in the first place. He wasn’t ready for it.”

As if I’ve been struck, I suddenly understand. She’s come to see her son-in-law in the same light as her prodigal husband, and with just as much disappointment.

“Anyway,” she states, and that conversation is clearly over.

Our shoes spring harshly on the dry grasses. “How about yourself?” she says, finally.

“Oh, I’m good.”

“You look terrible, Mrs Greene.”

I tuck my embroidered handbag up under my breast, both hands clutching it tight. “Oh, well,” I say.

## Chapter Seventeen

Last night was not as hot, a fresh breeze blowing in through the window. I even had to reach to the bottom of the bed and tug the eiderdown up over me and I slept better than I have in weeks. But as the sun rises higher in the sky, already the air is warming. I forgot to wind my clock yesterday. It could be nine. There's no sound in the house. I lie still and concentrate on listening. He must have left for the office.

The third step creaks, even under the careful lightness of my bare feet. Yes, the place feels empty. Relieved, I tie the wrap of my gown about me. Through the open doorway, the dining room appears to be full of sunshine. The curtains must have been pulled apart. I walk quietly in.

He's sitting at the table.

I stop. "Good morning," I say.

He nods and picks up a triangle of toast. His fingers are greased with butter.

"I thought you'd be gone."

Christopher gazes across the room to the mantelpiece. "It's only seven-thirty."

I look over at the clock, too, stupidly. I feel guilty, though if it's because I'd hoped my husband elsewhere or for some other reason I am not at all sure. I have felt guilty for a very long time. My feet are cold; I should have worn my slippers.

"I don't suppose Mabel's in," I say.

"I don't suppose so, no." His teeth crunch on the toast. He must have heated the bread in the range himself.

"You should've woken me. I'd have made breakfast for you."

"If you'd let me hire a live-in maid, we wouldn't have this problem." He puts down the crust and pats his lips with a faintly stained napkin. "I was going to knock at your door, but I thought better of it."

My hair is caught under the collar of my gown and I pull at it to tug it free. When he'd softly tapped last night, I raised my voice and said through the door, "Not at all well. I'm just falling asleep," and he hadn't even bothered issuing a civil comment, a courteous well-wishing. Too many nights like that in the last weeks. God knows, has he forgotten the years of silence? I cannot understand this. I thought he'd settle back to where we were before, two private domains, a tolerated decency between us.

I approach the table and place my hand gingerly against the teapot. "Would you like me to heat some more water?"

He doesn't even look up at me. "No, thank you." His chair scrapes as he stands. I step back quickly, and he glances at me. But his eyes cut me. He says, "I'm going in early. I'll be travelling to Sydney tomorrow. I need to get a few things done in the office beforehand."

"Sydney? You can't be serious. They have 'Flu down there."

"The world can't stop. I have a business to run." He walks to the door. His fingers on the white knob are sun-darkened, the nails blunt cut, perfectly clean. He seems to be hesitating. Does he want me to say something? Stop him?

"Christopher, I ... don't think it's a good idea. It says in the papers –"

"I have no intention of catching anything. Not that I don't appreciate your concern. Though I'm a little surprised, to be frank." His hand falls from the doorknob and he walks into the hallway.

The clock's tick is loud. His tea cup is still half-full, strong, dark liquid. A sugar cube lies under the saucer's rim. He hasn't put out a cup for me, or a bread plate, a knife. Perhaps he wanted to be gone before I came downstairs. Ironic how much that stings, considering. Maybe the weather is changing between us. He has tried so hard since I came back from Brisbane, so hard that it's been painful. I can never make it up to him, all that I've done, all that I've deprived him of.

I follow him out. He's putting on his hat at the hallstand. He has been delaying. I see him stare in the oval mirror to catch sight of me. I gaze straight at his reflection. "I'd like you to reconsider," I say. "Surely you could go down south later, when this epidemic is over. They won't mind."

"Who?" He bends to pick up his leather case.

"Whoever you're seeing. Everyone knows it's not safe to travel down there, especially on the train, with all sorts of people."

“I’m touched.”

“Oh, don’t be so pig-headed, Chris. You could die. No one in their right mind would make that journey if they had any choice in the matter.”

He’s heading for the front door. The morning light has brightened the stained glass panels into sharp, rich colour. “I wouldn’t think such a great train traveller as yourself,” he’s saying, “would be so ... constrained.”

He’s trying to anger me. I could slap him. “I went up North, that’s different, as you well know. They don’t have the ’Flu up there.”

“Not yet.”

If he opens that door and steps out on to the path, I will slam it closed after him.

He looks back at me as he turns the handle. “Just think what a relief it would be, Isabel,” he says, and he pulls it open.

I stand motionless by the mirror as the door shudders behind him. Through the red glass, I see his shape loom away.

He didn’t even kiss my cheek before he climbed aboard. His eyes betrayed him, and a whiteness framing his hardened lips. I wish I could have hugged him and told him not to be so sad, but I couldn’t do that. And he wouldn’t permit it. I have brought him to this. I’m a dreadful, dreadful woman.

I didn’t wave, either, as the train slid away. I watched it for only a few moments and turned my back on it. I had to hurry though the station hall with the station-master on my heels. I couldn’t speak.

Now, this afternoon, I find I have to change course. I thought a wander by the creek, some fresh air, might do me good. But Paddy Martin is on the white bridge, staring down into the water. He looked up and saw me, and glanced quickly back at the muddied current. He doesn’t want to speak to me. I’m a nuisance to him, shattering the peace of his solitude.

The sun is setting beyond him, collapsed into the horizon, and the sparsest light makes ghosts of the gum trees. Autumn is coming to the high country. In a handful of months the wind will whip my dampened hem against my legs, and my shoulders will round with a natural inclination to hide from the cold. How will I endure another winter up here? I turn around and walk back up the road.

## Chapter Eighteen

*A* *fraid of illness here Stop can I come up for a while Stop*  
“Here you are, back again, Mrs Greene.” The station-master has gone even further up in the world since all this quarantine business started. There’s a shine to his face, a slowness of gait that’s very nearly regal. But not an impervious air, no, rather a new-found merriment as if all of life’s challenges have been met and proved themselves only passing things; I suppose that’s a sign of essential good nature.

“Here I am again, Mr Stoppard. Off myself today, though.”

“He goes one way, you go the other,” he says, merrily.

I laugh to oblige him.

“Ah, well, who’d’ve thought we’d come to all this, dear?” he says, overcome by his recent affection for all about him. He takes my elbow as we walk in an artificial rhythm through his grand hallway, towards the platform and the white light of the shimmering day, the swirling clouds of coal-smoke. “If they go south, they head into danger; if they go north, they have to camp out like a pack of drovers across the border for a week or so. My, my, who would’ve thought we’d come to this? You have your mask, Mrs Greene, do you?”

“Oh, yes indeed. In my pocket.” I reach in for it, where I’d absent-mindedly slipped it after seeing Christopher off on the train, and just as well because I’ve packed away in my valise one of the two sets I’d stitched the other night. Not much use in there. Christopher acted so nonchalant when I handed his up to him on the train; he’s not like that, suave, cynical. I wish he wouldn’t put on that performance. It says so much, if he only knew it. He’s so angry. So hurt.

Mr Stoppard keeps his gaze on me as he, too, removes his gauze mask from his pocket and winds the ties about his ears. Like a child I follow suit while his eyes, suddenly the only bit of his face I can see, concentrate on my skill. “That’s it,” he says and his voice is muffled, but there’s a sort of importance in that too.



The platform is a strange world, men, women, children masked in white, voices quieter than is normal here, and something in the air, apart from the sinful pleasure of the sulphur-belch erupting from the train's funnel. They say it's the young and healthy who go down with it, young men, young women. That's the terrible injustice.

"Sit near a window," he says in my ear over a hiss of steam.

I feel my own moisture inside the gauze. My stomach is gripped with the fear, too. I look at the moving figures, a father herding his wife and three small children up against the brick wall near the Ladies Waiting Room and then standing to face them with his hands on his hips, as if his extended breadth will ward off an infectious blow from some passing passenger.

"And be careful who you talk to up in the quarantine camp, Mrs Greene. You never know where this crowd from Sydney has been."

He's escorting me to the carriage, though no one else is aboard. If he wants to ensure me a good choice of seats, the attempt is pointless for the people from the south will surely have the best already claimed, jackets and newspapers and flat-open books remarking possession. He steers me to the steps and hands me up as if I'm an invalid. "Is that the lot?" he says, or I think that's what he said as he lifts my valise up on to the dusty floor beside me.

"You're better off out of here, anyway," he shouts as he moves back, job done. "You'll be safer up there." His eyes, darker than I'd realised, a bruised tinge around the sockets, are already caught by some activity further down the platform.

I'm alone now, with little in the way of luggage, and what is ahead of me is vague as smoke.

At least the war has set us up with plenty of tents and army blankets. The air's very warm under here, even though we've already rolled up the lower flaps of canvas for the day's business. I stare, trance-like, at the ropes tautened against their pegs and beyond them the feet and legs of my fellow quarantined as they wander about the grounds, back and forwards. I prefer to sit in here on my bunk. I'm tired of continual movement.

The newspaper I've been not quite reading is three weeks old. I don't know what it's doing here. Nothing has interested me except the column headed, *Bolsheviks Approach German Border*. Are they going to start another war? Lev wouldn't want

that. He's a good man, I know that with certainty. His soul has astonished me with beauty. Not that he believes in the soul.

There's the school bell ringing us to lunch. That's what we call it, the school bell. There is a camaraderie among us, although to be frank the jokes are getting stale. It was an adventure at first, queuing for our meals, talking quietly into the night, a gang of us, while the children breathed rhythmically on their cots scattered in the dark. It was like our own childhood again. But it has worn thin. The bath tent put paid to it, the immodesty of it, men idling about outside, knowing we were in there, and for all I know my cameo moving jerkily on the canvas. And the two inches of water in the iron tub, the slippery soap eeling out of my hands to land on the makeshift floor. The worst part is that eventually one wants to walk according to one's inclination. And when cheeks are aching from too many shows of hilarity, from ironical greetings over and over again, how you long to close your own door on the world, feel the comfort of a familiar eiderdown over your head even in the heat, the cool blue satin casing. We are not permitted, however, to go up to the gate and say I'd like to go now. It is our duty to stay put, allow the doctors to examine us, spread our germs only among ourselves, hapless comrades.

After all this time, all these years, we are being infected by the world. We lived in a fool's paradise, I suppose, though I found it so unremitting. I've been so alive these past few months, alive in all the veins and arteries, blood pulsing through, and alive in my eyes, what I've seen, alive even in what my tongue at last has said. Alive the moment I was aware of Lev. He has changed me utterly and I will never be the same again. No matter if he cares for me ultimately or not. It is my natural state, after all, to be alone.

"Mrs Greene, dear." The voice is soft, sweet like music.

My gaze has remained on the tight, hairy knot of the hemp rope bound about the guy. The earth is dry, pale. It would taste of chalk. I look up. Her figure is dark against the bright opening and I can barely make her out. She's a small woman. As she approaches, her angles and curves become clear, and the heated smell of sweat and lavender water comes with her.

"Mrs Greene, dear," she repeats. "Don't forget your mask today. There's been a case."

"A case?" I don't know if I am excited or struck with terror.

“One of the boys just home, poor, poor chap. He’s fallen terribly bad, evidently. They’ve taken him out, I don’t know where. The hospital, I suppose.”

“Yes, I suppose they’d take him there. Is he the only one, do you think?” It suddenly matters to me, doesn’t it? I don’t want to catch it and die. Not now.

“Looks like there might be another, two friends they were, both back only a few weeks ago, God help their poor parents. They’re probably waiting at home for them to turn up. And here their young fellows are, right on their doorstep.” Her eyes are wide. They remind me of a frog’s; is that fear? I can feel my own heart beating.

We only need to survive one or two more days and we can leave. I will be more careful, wash my hands more frequently. Wear the awful gauze against my nose and mouth all day and all night if I have to. I’ve already gone from here in my thoughts. There’s such will in me, such desire. In two days I’ll meet Madeleine at our grandmother’s house in the country and I’ll make my excuses quickly, travel on as I intended to Brisbane. But first I’ll visit Stephen and Mary because after all there must be some generosity in life, some moments to spend in attendance of others. Mary may want to speak to me *in loco parentis*, express somehow the awful loneliness up there. And now having her husband back from the war. How is it between them, I wonder? I could hold the baby, walk him up and down if he’s colicky. Norah Martin says he’s a colicky child. Then, when I’ve done all that, portioned out the fiery gladness burning in me, I will go to where my heart already is. I am calm again, calm and concentrated.

“Well, you survived the wars.” Madeleine’s abruptness should really disguise a measure of anxiety on my behalf, but it doesn’t, apparently. She’s merely cross, as if I concocted the quarantine camp myself just to annoy her, or else put myself behind its wire fence out of pure mischief.

“One boy died,” I say to smite her. Instead I quite sicken myself. “A returned soldier.”

That has stopped her in her tracks. She turns her attention to the driving, lifts herself bouncily on the leather to gain a more comfortable seat. She deliberately refrains from even glancing at me. It doesn’t suit her that I contrived to pull a corpse out of the hat. She squeezes the horn rather viciously at a motor bus which has failed to stop and let us out on to the main street. Some of its passengers gaze down at us before they glide away.

“What of, his wounds?” she says finally.

“No, the 'Flu. A lot of them are dying from it, after all they've been through. Right on their own doorstep.” I fold my hands in my lap. The sun is relentless. My skirt is already warm.

I like this country town, the sturdy girth of the palms along the public avenues, a contentment in its settlements, a quiet satisfaction among its brick and stone and mortar. Are places always dusted with the relative colours of our own days, the hopes rearing again, the memories tangling behind like ribbons on a kite, the secret dreams of childhood? Perhaps it's so, or perhaps beauty is an absolute thing, discrete altogether from how it's perceived by us mortal mortals. What I have seen in Lev as I lay in his arms is almost tangible, weighted, breath-taking as a nugget of gold; nothing will ever dissuade me of that.

“They shouldn't have let them off the boats till they were sure,” she says. “I thought they were doing that. What's wrong with them, letting them get on trains?”

Her only dispute is with me. She doesn't like it that I have been in the thick of it, that I'm the one who has the news. She's mightily put out. I see from the corner of my eye how she does battle with the gear stick and I can't help but smile. I have to turn my head away as the innards grate and grind.

When she's stopped her racket, I say to pacify her, “You shouldn't have driven all the way down here to pick me up. I could easily have got to Aberdeen myself.”

“I didn't. I had a dinner invitation last night. You remember the Hamptons?”

“No.” She hasn't an idea of my life for the past twenty years, how wizened it has been.

“Oh, you do. Bertie Hampton. Cedarton. Anyway, they invited me down and I stayed last night.”

She's mollified now, casting a renewed eye over the riches of her social habitudes. She's mollified and I'm permitted to view the abundant pleasures of her life, watching from a grassy bank while she sails voluptuously by, her barge decked out in fineries as she receives the adulation of men, Bertie, Mr O'Meara of the theatre, our artistic Samuel Forsythe, and other more shadowy acolytes yet to be named. Women, also; there are many who seem enamoured of her, revolve around her either in envy or for the warmth her radiance bestows on them. Which am I? Probably her first and life-long servant, held close these past months because I've returned to take

up my position. We're as bad as one another. I haven't much choice but to be here, that's the thing. When it comes down to it, who else will take me?

The road out of town narrows with the perspective of distance. A peaceable snore begins to sound from the engine. The bush opens and takes us in, though we hover above it all like a summer mirage.

She speaks in a different voice now. "Was he married, this chap?" she says.

I too feel different, the breeze on my skin, the soothing purr of the automobile. "No. He was only twenty. He was on his way home to Rockhampton. So close."

## Chapter Nineteen

**D**oes everything have a shadow, even this place of bliss? I choose to forget so much. That's how I ended up marrying in the first place, I suppose. Marrying Christopher was the end of my dreams, putting childish things away, and truthfully something nagged at me even then, a puppy gnawing in ferocious silence at the hem of a floor rug. But before then, when there were still possibilities, this place gave me shelter, suggested a nostalgia of warmth too dim to remember. To attain to Aberdeen! It is beyond imagining, it is the nightingale in a fairy-tale cage, for only others have Aberdeen as their own. That is the hard part I choose to forget. It was here in this house, these gardens, I learned that lesson most keenly. It was like a taste of God, just once, fleetingly and denied ever after, but that one taste enough to send saints mad.

It's warmer here than my crystal home high in the Tablelands, warm but not heat-clogged and dank as it is on the torrid coast. It's perfect, somehow. The hoop pines have dropped their cones forgetfully and these are scattered over the grass in that way which still attracts me to them, all these years later. I walk over, bend and pick one up, two, examine their strange openings, the cracked vulnerability of them. They seem so abandoned.

What is that awful carry-on? Heavens, what's she doing, banging the silly dinner gong in that demented way, hanging over the verandah as if she's about to topple headfirst into the lavender?

"What?" I shout.

"A letter," she shouts back.

Lev! Has he found me, somehow? The cones scratch at my fingers as I run across the lawn. In this heat, such exertion immediately reduces me to slime, the sweat prickling under the whale-bone corset. I seem to frighten birds in my unlikely haste; they'd probably thought me of no more threat than a snail, so listless in my movements as they picked and chucked around me. They rise and squawk their suspicions, the succulent red rosellas departing in pandemonium, sparrows jumping for cover.

I almost trip up the front steps, drop a cone as I reach out for the wooden railing and it bounces down, one step after another. I look behind to study its fall and I stumble again.

“Slow down,” I hear her say and I think if she tells me once more what to do or what not to do I might finally scream at her, break a china cup, bang the feet of a chair hard against the floor.

I walk along the verandah with a deliberate dignity, my hand outstretched. She must be too curious herself to cross my purposes, for she comes quickly forward, the letter proffered as a child holds up a bloodied finger for a kiss. It’s a white envelope, the handwriting hidden under her grasp. But I already know. How could it possibly be from Lev? Who would he ask? Katherine perhaps. Would he, pent up, take her aside and say, where is she? Katherine wouldn’t know anyway, even if he did that most indiscrete thing. No. Of course it’s Christopher. I am bitter with disappointment.

“It’s from Christopher,” Madeleine says.

“Thank you,” I say and I presume my tone does not miss its mark. I’m tempted to add, “What does he say?” But I fear that’s a portion too far. She’ll presume I’m not myself, to imply criticism of her. And that’s invitation enough, always to be avoided, for questions, hectoring. Madeleine who makes free with tones of all shapes and sizes is deeply averse to even a glimmer of censure.

She looks a trifle put out even by that subtle sling, her eyes flaming into an affronted embarrassment. I prise the letter from her pincer fingers. Coward that I am, I’d prefer to avoid bad feeling so I say, “He must be back from Sydney.”

She recovers, glad to reassume her interest in my intimacies. “Why don’t you sit down and read it,” she says. “And I’ll get Susan to bring us out a pot of tea.”

Her footsteps ring on the wooden boards as she walks away.

The handwriting is so familiar to me, under-developed, a boy pretending to be a man. I slide my index finger inside the seal. I become aware of a shortness of breath. He begins to frighten me.

Two sheets. I hold them open on my lap, my hand resting on it like the feet of a bird. I hear the knell of a bell, a solemn stopping of clocks. It is he who will have the last word, and inevitably me who will cower. I have been doing it for so long that I don’t know how to do anything else. Doing it long before I ever married him, or met him. This is my own private hell and he is only a guest. For a while when we were young, grateful at least, I stepped out of it, happy or hoping to be. We both were, for a

little while. A breeze has come up out of nowhere and tremors the trees along the periphery of the garden. Up here sheltered by the house, I can't feel it on my skin, but I feel it inside. Perhaps I shall simply burn the letter and never hear the words said.

I'll read it quickly, perfunctorily. Madeleine is returning up the hall, or Susan.

*I write to inform you that I have completed my journey and am again home. It may be of little interest to you to know that I do not seem to have caught anything. Your note awaited me on my desk where you had placed it. I should think a braver person might have spoken to my face. Your coming and going has to cease. You treat me with disdain. What do you require? Since you have so little regard for me, can I assume you would prefer to reside elsewhere? I have never done anything to deserve this.*

"How is he?" she says, and I jump. The quality of her voice denotes me as someone for whom to be concerned, and she tiptoes to the wicker chair opposite me. All this tells me she knows a great deal already. I suppose it was foolish to imagine she wouldn't have sensed the truth, or one half of it at any rate.

I find I need to swallow. "Angry," I say at last. I prepare myself for attack.

But she surprises me. "You should never have married him," she says.

"Isn't it rather late in the day?" My head drops back against the cushion.

"I never knew why you did it," she continues as if she had delayed years and could delay no longer. "It was the most extraordinary announcement. I remember wondering if your mother and stepfather made you do it. You know, Iz, I thought you'd do something with your life."

She is sitting on the edge of her chair, her face strained with some kind of burden.

"Do something? I don't know what you mean?"

"You were always so different. I don't mean bad," she says quickly. Has that anxiety come across my face? "I don't know what I thought. I just never thought you'd end up with someone like Christopher. I like him well enough. He's quite a decent person, really and truly."

How strange and perverse that it's him I feel for, want to defend. I couldn't bear that he would hear this conversation, would understand himself to be disposed of. It's not his fault. Surely more mine.

"Have I said too much?"



I gaze at the trellis, the purple bougainvillea entwined through it. I shake my head. I'm embarrassed that tears have welled in my eyes. I don't like to cry. "No, it's all right. I just don't know."

"There's only one thing I know, Isabel. You've been unhappy for years and years. And I don't want you to be unhappy."

Is kindness so rare that the heart is shocked open? The tears slide down my cheeks. It's an astonishment to me that another human being has showered me with such affectionate sympathy. And yet I suppose I know what lies between Madeleine and I, for all our bickering; the tender and unworded defence of one another during the trials of childhood, one feeling the other's blows, her crawling in under this very house one day to find the disgraced me in the dark, a contraband fairy cake seeded with dirt by the time she got to me, and I recall once shouting at my uncle, her father, that he was mean and beastly to have spanked her, where did I get that courage, for it wasn't even her fault the vase had broken, I said, a possum truly did scamper in through the window and bump it off the piano.

I wipe my face with my handkerchief and I am laughing.

"What is it?" she says, and she smiles with uncertainty.

"Oh, just remembering that possum that got us both into trouble."

"If you'd had the address, we could have just dropped them a note and invited them up to dinner."

"This is your idea," I say, rather untruthfully. The road is rough and ready, rutted by the wheels of timber-laden drays. We could be on a wild-goose chase.

"Do you want to go or not?" she says, threatening.

"Is that the railway?"

The attempt to both divert her and prove her wrong was not wise on my part. She slews the vehicle towards the tree line with a fascinating illogicality. "Well spotted," she says. "Oh, Crikey." Her gloved hands criss-cross as she swings the steering wheel at a forty-five degree angle, and we are both silenced for a while as we and the car regain our composure, trundling along the road under trees which have become increasingly high, increasingly close. It is a good two minutes before she says, "We'll follow it to the new station and ask them there if they know where these two live."

It's the money, that's all. And the money is why Stephen has always shone, like a new penny one might say. If he'd been poor and still as daring as he was, as wild a horseman and so brightly handsome that the girls swooned out of shop windows as he passed, how would he have seemed then? Steer clear, fathers would have said instead of inviting him to dinner. And it's the money that has Madeleine eager to put face to story, to meet this young man I'd told her about who turned his back on his father's spreading empire and set out for himself, the prince becoming pauper for some war-torn ideal. But there always was more to Stephen. He chose the Martins as his closest accomplices, Paddy, and Katherine too. Marrying Mary Martin shocked not only his father but the entire district, a poor Irish girl whose own father had abandoned the family, whose mother worked in a pub. Norah wasn't too happy about it either, though I can't really understand that. Norah loved him almost as much as her own sons. You'd think she'd be pleased to over-turn the expected run of things. There isn't much she agrees with, that's her very nature. But she didn't like the idea any more than anyone else did.

"A train's coming," Madeleine says.

I hear it too and begin to smell the leak of smoke. The track runs on an earth elevation, built up a few feet from the forest floor under the towering of trees. The whistle comes tumbling like a clown into the order of this scented bush, the quietly battered road, the two ladies prim in their motoring vehicle. We giggle, the pair of us. "Give him a wave," Madeleine instructs me as she reaches for the horn, honks it discordantly.

He catches us up, the engine running along with us, deliberately slowed for a few moments it seems, and the driver leans his elbow on his cabin ledge and shouts out some retort which we fail to make out.

"What did he say?" I say to Madeleine, out of the side of my mouth so not to offend him, and I keep smiling just as she does.

"No idea," she says but she honks the horn in amused response to whatever it was.

And he, satisfied, pulls out ahead of us and soon the last few of the carriages come into view, rattling along with us. They are singing onboard. Male voices, one quite a good tenor. I'm gratified that I recognise the tune; my blood tingles. It is Lev's song. And then I see, directly in our line of vision, a large red flag flapping violently

from a carriage roof. The red banner disappears and appears again between tree trunks, darting among the endless green like a ribald parrot.

“Have they kidnapped the train?” Madeleine says.

“I don’t know.”

Is it because I’ve already abandoned so much that I’m suddenly reckless, ruthless almost about the coming havoc. It’s as if I’ve been waiting for this, for all my life. I don’t know who I was before this tempestuous fire began to burn.

“Have we missed some news?” she continues musing. She’s driving faster. “Blast! I knew I should’ve gone back to town. The revolution’s probably happening.”

Of course it’s not. How could it? It’s romantic dreaming, Lev’s ideas. In the depths of me that is what I think, though I’d never say it to him. The truth of life is that nothing changes, tomorrow the same as today in spite of all attempts to escape. “Don’t be so bloody stupid,” I say, and I’m overwhelmed by a rage which seems to have no rhyme or reason.

“Isabel!”

My language! I’ve never used that vulgarity before, and prickle with disgust if I ever hear it from some foul-mouthed woman of a certain class. And what if Madeleine is right, and I am wrong? Have I misjudged everything? Madeleine is so distracted by my unexpected flash of temper that she’s allowed the train to hare away from us. Then she bends over the wheel, concentrating again, but I am hot with shame. Our vehicle catches up and we hear the singing voices, their sound embattled against the heavy push of air, and the train itself and our motor car embattled with it too.

It has been lost among trees. We are both caught in a silent desire to find it.

“It has to end up at the station. It’s the terminus or whatever they call it,” she shouts as the wheels bump recklessly around a bend.

“Be careful,” I say, holding my hand to my heart. “The bridge!”

“I know there’s a ...I think I hear them again, do you?” She is slowing and we glide towards the creek. The bridge is uncommonly pretty, verdant banks on either side. We cause an echo as we cross. Something about the place reduces us to a mild pace, a hiatus of calm. There’s a settlement, five or six cottages spread out along the road, their verandahs crossed with beams, greenery and dappled household flowers thrusting up between them. It’s a fairy-land. I see a woman at the post office door,

come out to peer at us. Everything is dappled here, the trees so high around us that light and shade sharpen the prettiness into beauty. The road ahead leads deeper into bush but we already see the railway station down the end of an avenue which veers off at the fork. The train sits there, bilious with smoke.

“There’s something going on,” she says.

“Don’t go too near, just in case.”

“You’re such a scaredy-cat, Iz.”

She’s right on that score, I’m sure. I wish I had the bravery to be in the thick of it. She does seem to have taken my sensitivities to heart though, bless her, and pulls at the brake, slides us on to the side of the road. It’s an unexpected relief to no longer hear the aggravated puttering of the car engine, to no longer feel the vibration of constant movement. We are perfectly still, watching. There are cicadas in the leafery about us, humming gently in the satisfaction of this moist forest.

“The station master doesn’t look too happy,” she says quietly. We are the audience to a momentous event, or at least she has persuaded me of such. Our breathing is in harmony, chest-shallow, quick.

He’s waving his arms in either a vigorous set of directions or frustrated fury. He had marched to the carriage where a young fellow has clambered up to reclaim his red flag. The boy hoists it from its securing, tucks the pole under his arm and climbs back down.

Outside in the yard is a line-up of half a dozen carts and drays, each with one man aboard, sitting, waiting, watching. The ballast train begins to disgorge the men inside, a dozen of them. They step out one by one, adjust their hats to the glare, wipe their faces with sunburnt forearms. The flag is passed, impressively adroit, over the station-master’s head to the man who seems to lead them, and this seems to inspire the tenor voice to rise up again and others join in. They fall into formation without so much as a thought and parade past the station-master, who seems to stand non-plussed for a few moments. Are they returned soldiers, these boys?

The men on the waiting wagons start to jump to the ground.

“Are they with the Reds?” Madeleine asks. With a great deal of leather-slip, grating as chalk on a blackboard, she somehow manages to kneel on her seat, props her arms on the dashboard.

It seems appropriate to follow her course. Though, I must say, there’s a degree of discomfort not outweighed by benefits. My shoes push uncomfortably against the

seat-back and the skirt of my dress is caught too tight under my knees. Perhaps the very act focuses the mind. "They are on the other side," I answer.

The thing heats up out in the yard. The station-master, a rather older gentleman and hurrying in a distressed manner, has reached the Red leader who seems intent on fixing the flag on one of the drays. He's caught by surprise. As he climbs up on the rim of a wheel, the older man makes a grab for the pole.

The ranks are suddenly disarrayed. The six drivers, farming men from the looks who've been standing together like a flock of cockatoos on a telegraph wire, move as one, their limbs shooting out from all sides. And meanwhile the Red ranks have broken and begin to spread fan-like. It's all so unlikely.

"Are they going to fight?" I ask.

"What's he saying?" She leans her head out the window.

Quite clearly I see a man's face being punched. The arm was quick and thick as it thrust forward, and its recipient staggers back. I'm distracted by Madeleine who, rather stupidly, withdraws inside the cabin and buries her face in her arms. "Have they guns?" I hear her say, her voice muffled.

As I look back, I realise that a few seconds have changed the entire scene, every man engaged in some flailing act, and two already collapsed on the ground. I don't like it. I've never seen a fight, not with blows and blood. It is uglier than I could've imagined, a tremor rising up from them, anger let loose and an unexpected fear. Yet I can't bury my face like her. I watch with my hand to my forehead.

Yet, miraculously, it all ceases. Comrades offer a hand to the fallen, haul them up, and each side walks off to different ends of the station yard. One man drags a heavy box across the dirt, a dusty cloud behind it. He stops beside the clapboard wall of the station offices, a few feet from the water tank, and remarkably he stands upon it, holds out his hands to call for quiet. And as if this were any other Sunday afternoon, his men gather 'round; and further afield the farmers cluster under a tree where one fellow lights up his pipe.

Madeleine has reappeared, or her eyes and nose at any rate. "What are they doing now?"

"It looks like they're having a meeting," I say.

She's regained her demeanour as if, in fact, she never lost it in the first place. Ten minutes have passed peacefully enough and though we can't comprehend the

understanding which must have been reached, the drays are slowly filling with pick-axes and mallets, thick slabs of wood and the shining runs of metal which will constitute the railway tracks. The men, both Reds and farmers, trot back empty-handed to the emptying train and return more slowly with fresh burdens. Madeleine has decided to ask the station-master for directions to Stephen and Mary Ferguson's place.

I tried to stop her. She can't resist. Her cream parasol springs up as she walks down the road towards them. Sitting here in the shade, I can sense the impulse in her, that dazzled response to stimulus, as much a baby grasping for dangles of coloured paper as she ever was. That's who she is; not so much the admirer of the wealthy and the good after all, and never merely the flatterer, Madeleine. So few understand how simple she is, for all her ragged faults. She's so alone, really.

The tiniest bird imaginable has dropped to the car's bonnet, drawn by the black glossiness perhaps. I don't move. He turns his pointed, pretty little head, darting and bobbing, surveying the lie of the land, and yet it does not recognise me. I am a rock, a fallen log or so far from his experience that I don't even exist. I watch the private intensity of his moment, his casual attendance to the daily round, the self-fulfilling meaning of it all. There is no barrier between us, no glassy windshield, no heaviness of bone and feather and hair, and I touch him with some other element, a sea-tide that brings him closer to me and I to him, brothers of blood, of ticking hearts. And in this instant he means more to me than any other thing in the whole world of stars, shooting sparks; in this presence, his and mine, I see him as he is, perfectly disgorged from the trees that bore him, and on the brink of collapse back into the forest debris. Dear bird, my beloved one.

The moment goes, I breathe out too deeply, move my hand just a fraction, open my palm to the air and he's gone. My purse lies on the floor next to my feet. I reach down for it, snap open the catch and slowly pull out the linen handkerchief. It's doused with eau-de-cologne, and I hold it under my nose merely for the distraction of it. I am shivered with the shock of his leaving.

She's walking slowly back up the road. The breeze blows at her smock, the pale lilac lawn, and under it her hips and thighs are suddenly chiselled. The hairs on my own arm, propped on the door, respond to the movement of warm air. We are breathing statues caught in this shining light, the roadway paved by it, the massed trees heaving their heavy leaves; and down below at the station yard the movement of

men whose muscles move invisibly beneath their shirts, lift and walk and throw, and the horses sharpen into tension at each loud loading and relax again as the man wanders off. I hear her footsteps now and she begins to talk to me even before she reaches the car.

“He says he’ll wire for the police if there’s any more trouble.” The door opens and her careless weight on the seat shifts the balance in the cab.

“Who are they?”

“Oh, nobody. A bunch of navvies down to work on the railway extension. There’s a few hot heads among them, evidently. One Russian fellow.”

“Oh?” I wish I could see them more clearly. I narrow my eyes.

“I didn’t recognise him.” She speaks with authority, of course, as she does on every subject. I almost feel like telling her.

“Oh, well,” she says. “They’ll find themselves in hot water if they keep flying that red flag. The mood’s gone against them.”

“I don’t see how.” I am defensive, heated. “I don’t think the government had the right to ban it. It’s a free country, isn’t it?”

I’m more steamed up than I should be, I suppose. I turn my head and examine a heap of freshly-dropped leaves on the forest floor, damp with the remains of dew. A queue of ants line up to venture across it, their leaders already out ahead. They are a few inches from the rubber of the car wheel, but they don’t seem to have noticed it.

Madeleine is quiet. I glance at her. She’s elaborate in her new ritual. The silver cigarette case is open on her lap and, the tube poised in her mouth, she shakes the lighter with some vigour. The lash of flame causes her to jerk back her head. But she lights the cigarette determinedly, scissors her fingers about it, withdraws it and blows a stream of white smoke into the air. She’s been indulging in this behaviour only in the last few weeks, learned apparently from a Captain with whom she dined at his family property. No doubt she flirted all night, and he perhaps was too flattered to overly worry at the age difference.

“Well,” she says. “It’s what I’ve heard. The men coming home are all for the ban.”

The captain, I presume.

There’s no point talking to her. So I say, “I don’t suppose you found out where the Fergusons live?”

“Yes,” she says, or assaults me with, her voice pretending an affront. “I did, as a matter of fact. I told you the station-master would know.” And now her tone changes. “Oh, look, they’re coming.”

The first wagon driver has pulled his mare around to face the dirt road, loosely brings the reins down on her shoulders and she starts work, hauling against the burden on the dray behind her. In the yard, another man slowly directs his horse to follow. I hope these farmers get good money for this railway job, not that the poor horses benefit.

They make quite a noise, rolling up towards us. Madeleine puffs on her cigarette, barely drawing in. She coughs and says, “They agreed to haul for them if the navvies kept their flag to themselves and didn’t try to raise it on any of the wagons. And they said the men have to march behind, too.”

She tells me all this as if I can’t see with my own eyes what’s going on. The little army forms itself again in the yard and the flag is held up over their heads. The station-master turns his back and walks away. In disgust, I presume, silly man. Under the rattling of wood and the clang of iron, the tenor voice comes sweet and true.

“We’ll wait for them to pass,” she says, senselessly. It’s perfectly obvious that we should turn now and get back up the road before they do. We’ll be stuck behind them, which I suppose is what she wants. Until she gets tired of it.

The farmer lifts his hat as he sees us up ahead, and I hold up my hand to him. Madeleine waves the smoke-trailing cigarette. “Here’s trouble,” she murmurs under her breath.

It takes me a moment to understand. I gaze down to the end of the parade and there it is. The regiment is on the trot and veer over to run along the grassy verge, the beds of fallen leaves. The flag waves deliriously under the branches and the singing takes on a different rhythm, a staccato tuned to the beat of their boots. They are surprisingly swift. Perhaps the fervour of combat has put wings on their feet. They sound like the wind, the papery tread on leaves, the whisper of their breathing. I will them on.

The lead driver seems unaware of the threat. He’s still happily staring at our car, forming the story in advance of his telling of it later. But perhaps the flattened ears of his horse, or some other alert, causes him to look over his shoulder. They are gaining on him; already it’s too late. The two in the lead swing back on to the road,



right in front of him. The rest of the crew slide in behind them. The horse dances in consternation.

He's a good looking fellow, the man out in front, dark in the Irish way, face ruddy. They are all boys, regardless of age though one appears to be in his thirties, as pleased as children at a birthday party. Breathless, they slow to a walk, falling out of their neat rows so that now they seem to be on a comradely stroll, and as they come up to us, they greet us boldly as old friends.

The Irishman ducks his head and peers right in Madeleine's window. We can smell the assault of work-sweat. "That's a fine car you have, ladies," he says. Behind him, the others are inclined to come to a halt, glance in at us, raise their caps.

Madeleine takes her time about acknowledging him, though I smiled immediately. She arches her hand rather glamorously to draw more deeply than before on the cigarette. She seems to choose a spot above her where she exhales with lazy intent, and then she turns to him. "Jealous?" she says.

He laughs, his eyes responding to her in a way that embarrasses me.

"Not if you salute the old red flag," he says, and cool as you like as if she'd rehearsed it, she lifts her hand again, still trailing smoke, to the side of her forehead.

He slaps the door where her elbow has just been resting. His hands are criss-crossed with tiny lines, the hairs blonde in the sun, one nail chipped right down the centre. "You'll do," he says. He has forgotten me, I think.

He moves off reluctantly. I turn in my seat and watch him striding away ahead of the procession. He walks like a man who presumes a woman's eyes are on him.

The first wagon comes astride us now, the driver's face as he looks down at us expressing a concerned question. I smile at him too, reassuringly, and he passes.

"This'll take all day," Madeleine says.

It is paradise, this place he has taken Mary and the baby. They must sip nectar. What it would be, to be loved like that.

The road has dipped down. On both sides of us cedar trees tower, and we're assailed with the scent of leaf droppings, years upon years of rich decay, and the fresh reek from a felled log and its splintered trunk. The creek suddenly shows itself at the bend, its water not breaking even on the rocks gathered at the ford but instead forming a filmy membrane over their smooth surfaces, light-filled sparks only here and there on a sharpened edge. Madeleine makes very slow passage through the two inches of

water flooding our path, the lowest point of the valley. We are part of the creek as our wheels turn, the water splashing in tiny lapping waves against the tyres. The remnants of late summer wildflowers are dying slowly along the stony banks.

“Gorgeous,” she says, and a bird screeches up on the rise, perhaps awakened from his mid-morning slumber by our peculiar intrusion.

I don’t speak at all. If I could make my own little home here, tucked among trees, a cedar house maybe; reach a bucket into the creek for water, make tea and bake bread. For Lev. Roll out pastry and feel the smooth velvet under my floury hands as I did as a child in the kitchens with Cook, her whitened hands warm on top of mine, her big, warm breast pressed against my bony back.

“Keep an eye out.” Her voice is a determined fly, circling in the busy air.

Perhaps it’s the infantile rhythm of carriage that has lulled me into such dreams, but they are sweet and needed. Anyhow, my eye does indeed fall on a house of sorts, a shack more like it. It’s just visible between trees. “Up ahead, on the right,” I say.

“Heavens!”

I can hardly blame her for her surprise, or amazed disappointment. After all, her own grandfather would’ve started his life in the bush like this or even worse, when he as a young man set out to make a place for himself in the world, to cut it out with his own bare hands. Why go back? What kind of perversity cleanses itself of the sweat of generations, throws back in their faces all they have gained?

And I think of Mary Martin, living here. The high hopes she had, a life of comfort awarded to her on her marriage. And Norah, for all her strange reluctance about the wedding, here at last was the slim offering of help, a son-in-law who had money, who would make more. When I heard the story of what Stephen had done, that was one thing. Seeing it another. I don’t know why I’m so cross. I’m as bad as Christopher. I can just hear him.

“It mightn’t be the place,” Madeleine says as she drives the car off the road and down to the cleared grass just outside the cabin.

“Maybe.” I lean across the back of the seat and try to see inside the window. “I don’t think they’ve got glass. It’s muslin or something.”

Madeleine is trying to peer in, too. “She’s tacked it on inside, from the looks.”

“Mightn’t be as bad if they painted it,” I’m saying as the door opens. “Yes. That’s her.”

Quickly, we give each other a collegiate commentary, raise our eyebrows. Then I clamber out. Mary's waiting on the doorstep, uncertain.

The slam of the car door is ungainly in this place of high, silent trees. The air prickles with heat. As I walk around to the makeshift path, even the tread of my shoes is unusual in the particular harmony of the day.

"Mrs Greene!"

She's plumper than the last time I saw her, her arms as fatty and dimpled as her mother's.

"Hello, dear. My cousin and I are staying nearby. Hope you don't mind us dropping in unannounced," I say stupidly.

And to my astonishment, her eyes almost close and she begins to cry. "I'm so glad to see you," she says in a high, tiny voice.

Why do tears in a young person make you rush to comfort? I find myself enclosing her and murmuring, "There, there." She's as warm as toast. She nestles against me as if I can offer her whatever it is she needs, a false enough proposition. I rub a fleshy upper arm, skin as soft as a baby's. Pretending is all I can do in the circumstances. That might be enough, perhaps.

I hear Madeleine coming up to us. Mary's shoulder blades shift, her arms slacken and she begins to withdraw from me. Madeleine, as she comes to a standstill beside us, looks at me with something approaching sympathy.

Just as well we brought the scones and cakes. Maddie's cook put a pot of jam and a jar of cream in the basket too, and told me not to forget to give the cream a stir when we got there – I think I may have known that myself. The Welsh dresser barely fits in this place. She has three cups hanging from hooks; I'd like to know where the rest of them are. I gave her six when she married. Broken in the move, probably. I lift them down.

Mary sank into a kitchen chair as we unloaded our goodies. The little boy is trying to get on her knee, though she's barely aware of him even as she spreads her skirt to take him. I'm not sure he should be barefoot. His nose is running, and he rubs his forearm across it as if it's itching him, poor laddie.

"I was so scared. I didn't sleep for two nights, just sat beside his cot, watching him. But he's all right." She leans down and kisses his unkempt hair. "I thought when I seen you Mum must have got on to you about it. Steve was going to send another

telegram this morning, to tell her it wasn't 'Flu after all. She's probably worried sick. I probably shouldn't have sent the other one in the first place. I just didn't know what to do." She seems to be addressing Madeleine, who has drawn up a chair beside her, while she absently kisses again the pale forehead and the boy relaxes, rests against her bosom.

"If I'd known, I would have been here days ago, Mary." I click my tongue. "All alone out here."

"It's all that about the 'Flu in the paper, killing people. That's what got my wind up."

"Of course it did. I wish I'd known. We're only a few miles down the road there, at our grandmother's house, Aberdeen. No, I haven't heard from your mother at all, I just wanted to look you up, that's all, see your new place."

I don't even know if she's listening to me. She seems to be sniffing his skin. I watch them both.

As the child's eyes catch mine his gaze turns mournful and, shockingly, his face hardens, the watery eyes narrow and he makes it clear that I am his enemy. For just a moment I feel a panicked rage. But I hold up a scone silently, and he begins to surrender. The smile comes slowly.

Meanwhile Madeleine has assumed a role I've never seen her play before. Her elbow is planted on the table and she leans her head toward Mary. Their knees almost touch. The child has barely noticed her. "One thing about being out here," Maddy says. "You're less likely to catch it. You're fairly isolated."

"Would he have jam and cream on his scone?" I say.

Mary gazes over at me, almost dreamily. "I should be doing that, Mrs Greene."

"I'll leave the cake for you later, when Steve gets in." I'm not sure if I should present the cream in a bowl or leave it in the jar. Is it more than silly, in this haphazard place, to have a tea party?

"Oh, no, you must have some cake yourselves," Mary says. "Please."

As I attempt to stir the cream, the sounding of the fork against the glass jar causes both women to withdraw from their conversation. I'm afraid it will turn to butter. I suddenly stop as if I know what I'm doing and put it down on the table. Madeleine studies it for a moment, then looks up at me. She widens one eye, questioning.

“Perhaps I should put that in a bowl,” I say. I hold the whitened fork, dripping cream, over the cup of my hand.

“In the dresser.” Mary has the air of the exhausted, the rescued, the collapsed, barely caring of the social niceties.

“This is him,” Mary says.

We’ve drunk so much tea that my bladder aches. I shall have to risk the outside dunny and God knows what’s lurking in there. I wish I’d gone ten minutes ago. I’ll have to wait for a while, now that Steve’s arrived. What a nuisance.

The horse’s hooves have stilled and footsteps come across the grass. They sound rather light to me, and urgent.

The three of us watch the door. I haven’t seen him since his return, though he stayed with his parents for one night before he moonlighted across the border. No one in the town said anything about it, nor even met each other’s eyes the next day out of grim loyalty to one of our own. I feel an eagerness now, a fluttering excitement.

The door swings so violently that even though we have willed it to open, each of us draws back.

There stands Katherine, distraught. “Oh, no,” she cries.

She holds the door handle as if unwillingly to release it. Her eyes move over us more explicitly and I see doubt register. “Is the doctor here?” she says.

“Don’t wake the baby,” Mary says. “We just put him down. It’s only a cold.” She stands and I smell some lingering warmth of decades ago, warm milk and talcum powder and an innate summer sweetness of the skin. I bow my head as she passes behind my chair like a pungent breeze. There are things that can’t be spoken of, never the words found.

“Oh, I thought ...” Katherine, too, bows her head. She has beautiful hands, womanly hands. She places one on her breast. “Oh, God.” She looks over at me. “I thought you were the doctor or someone.”

“The car,” I say.

She nods. “Oh, when I rode up and saw it parked there.”

Mary reaches her and the sisters hug. Katherine clings to her, dark hair barely distinguishable from the other’s. Kate seems even more upset now, for some reason.

“Did you ride?” Mary says, accusingly.

“I had to! I borrowed the mare from a girl’s father, at work.”

On some understanding, the sisters walk towards the double bed and Katherine stares down at the little bundle, a not very clean sheet folded back at his waist. She whispers, "I couldn't think of any other way to get out here quickly."

"Did Mum get on to you?" Mary gazes down too.

As I look at them, the resemblance is still strong despite the weighty motherliness of the one, the unexpected and unaware elegance of the other; the shared, exquisite Irish skin, intelligence of the pale eyes, and the unnameable image families bear, as fleetingly glimpsed as a ghost, undeniable.

"Peaceful," Katherine says to herself and then, as if she's just heard her sister's question, says quietly, "Telegram came last night."

She walks up to me, leans and kisses me on the cheek and I'm quite overcome. Madeleine sits forward already expectant before I say, "Have you met Katherine, Madeleine? Katherine Martin. This is my cousin, Miss Stephenson."

"How do you do, Miss Stephenson?" Kate says very nicely.

"Don't tell me you've ridden all the way out from Brisbane," Madeleine says, uninterested in the courtesies, it seems, as if she feels they're not required here, or else that these girls are somehow her familiars. I suppose the circumstances have stripped the moment of superfluous needs.

"I got off at lunch-time today. I haven't even changed." And indeed she still wears her white blouse, stained under the arms, the starch gone limp. "Is this your chair?" she says to her sister but she barely glances at Mary before she subsides into it. There's something not right about her. Tired, I suppose, and fretting all the way out on the long road. That might be it.

"So he's all right?" she says as a question she has already answered.

The afternoon turns toward evening, one large slice of cake remains on the table between us, and I am sick with tea. And worst of all, Katherine barely speaks. I don't know what's wrong with her. She has stood up twice to go and Mary has insisted she sit down again, unhappy to lose her. As for me, I only want to ask her one thing. How is he? I can't think how to say it. I gaze at her profile. She's tense. Pale. It's the fit and healthy who fall prey to this thing, whatever delight the gods are taking in scything down this sturdy generation. She looks wretched.

As if she feels my eyes on her, she turns and says, "Did you hear about the Russians?"

I shake my head. I don't trust myself to speak

"The police came into our place and searched their rooms. They took out papers and all sorts of things. And they raided their clubrooms in Stanley Street, too, so they had to move."

My heart feels like a fist. "Where to?" I say, though my voice is barely audible.

"Not move from our place. The clubrooms had to move. They got that hall down the road from the boarding house."

"They're really cracking down," Madeleine says. She is enjoying herself this afternoon, caught up in this new drama. She thinks she knows so much.

"They have no right," I say. "It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Not if they're breaking the law," she responds. It's a matter of whatever I say, she disagrees. As usual. As if her life depended on it.

"What law? They have their beliefs, and they're entitled to them." I know it's impolite, the two of us bickering in front of these girls and, after all, we are the elders, the supposed influence of calm.

"Stephen met some Reds during the War," Mary says. It's she who is the calm one now, freshened by the diversion of guests, restored to a proper life, to her proper self. Maddy and I, freed from each other by her intervention, look across the table.

She nods. "There was one captain he met that he spent a good bit of time with. They went to Paris."

Katherine stares at the bedpost, rather than at her sister.

Madeleine senses a good story. Beside me, she adjusts herself in the chair.

"Paris?"

Mary's fingers are playing with an abandoned chip of icing. "He said he made a lot of sense. About the war and everything."

I side a victorious glance at Madeleine, the sort of glance which I know to be unworthy, childish. Having reduced myself to remorse, I lean back and fold my hands in my lap.

"I'm sure he did," Maddy says. Perhaps she does have some idea about all this, I don't know. "Though what that's got to do with his father's business is the great mystery. I would think he'd be glad to come back to it."

Mary regards my cousin with a look that suggests entrancement. Madeleine is giving her satisfaction. I suppose I should have thought to do that myself, the poor

child. But of course, Maddy doesn't know Stephen, whatever she's imagined of him. And she doesn't know Lev, not as I do. Watching Mary's face soften before my eyes, as if hearing words from a stranger has the power to bring her own desires to flower, I'm not prepared for the incision of Katherine's quiet voice.

"What of the others who can't get jobs?" she says. "Their fathers can't set them up in a sawmill or a wood providers or any sort of business. What do they do?" Kate's skin has flushed. I'm sure she's not well. And when she finally turns her eyes towards the rest of us, they are welling with tears or so it seems to me.

Madeleine however either doesn't see or doesn't care. She says, "And what of your sister? What of her, one minute living in comfort, the next like this. What of her feelings?" She very nearly could have added, "Madam!" "What of her feelings, Madam?" Madeleine is affronted by Kate, has been from the start, now that I see it. I want to kick her ankle.

Kate, diminished, casts such a look at her sister and a tear plops right down to her chin. Madeleine understands nothing.



## Chapter Twenty

Christopher would be appalled by all this splashing of water on foreheads and chests, big-boned men crossing themselves with tiny, self-conscious movements before they push through the inner door. He likes his religion plain. I'm uneasy myself, standing here just inside the porch doors. Beer on their breaths, some of them. I had no idea they came in after a hard day's work.

Heaven knows what he'd say if he'd seen me earlier, sitting in a pew, my only company one female lisping her prayers like cat spits at a statue. Witchery, he'd call it. The heavy smell of burning candle wax was a little too pungent, the ghosts of rising smoke a little too hypnotic. I had to get some air. The men eye me with surprise as they come up the steps. What if Katherine drops in? What would I say? Hardly that I'm hiding from her. I wish he'd hurry.

I could be here all night. I'm not even certain he passes this way.

Has Lev thought of me as I have of him, these past weeks? What if Marina has resumed her position? She's his countrywoman, after all. Knowledgeable as I am not. And she has that thoughtless courage they all seem to have. What on earth can he have seen in me? I'm so afraid suddenly. What if he looks at me as if to say, why has she returned? What does she want with me?

The night falls fast and the river smell rises to meet it. Moths already exalt in the light of the porch, flail their crusty cones against the heated globe, shiver their defiant white wings. I wave my hand evasively. These creatures that nonsensically fail to be beautiful as butterflies are beautiful. Eager for the wrong things, perhaps.

Another set of footsteps. They seem louder as the sun goes down, more arousing of curiosity. Or dread. These are not the weightless, triple-tap of a woman. I can barely make the man out. He's not turning in here, anyway, not another Irish labourer. I move into the open. He has passed, about to cross the road, to walk up beside the foundry wall. If it's him, and it may well be, I'll miss him if I don't hurry. He'll go quickly over to the boarding house, step inside and I won't be able to follow, to risk Katherine's seeing me with him, shame myself in front of the landlady.

I run across the churchyard, down on to the road and up again to the grassy path. He's just ahead, the pale shirt broad on his back, catching moonlight. A full, low, astonishing moon above our left shoulders. He begins to slow. But I'm still running, breathless. He stops and turns.

The smell in here is almost too much, the stewing of cabbage, onions, the sweat of these unwashed working men. I'm not a prejudiced person, I hope, but I find this close, bristled crowd of foreigners, and even the women with the stink of a week's unacquaintance with soap reeking from them in the awful, wet heat just too much. I don't know how I'll eat the greasy soup laid down in front of me, a pallid dumpling floating among the mashed beetroot, too much resembling the drowned.

And I don't understand the awkward air between us, Lev and I, why he's reserved to the point of silence. It's almost as if I've committed a crime. What have I done?

"You don't like it?"

I look at him across the small table. His hair has grown longer and the scattering of grey through it is more obvious under the electric light. He's tired, dark-eyed.

"No, I like it," I lie. "Not that hungry."

It's hard to speak in here. Lev's elbow bumps one of our neighbours as he lifts his spoon. I want to speak, or even better not to speak, to touch his face, feel my heart against his.

"What were you doing there?" he says. I've been telling him, hoping to entertain, of Madeleine's and my engagement with the railway navvies, the singing of revolutionary songs as they marched up the dusty road ahead of the fuming farmers in their wagons. He doesn't think it funny. He says he knows of it, that rumours have spread since like wildfire of flag-waving Bolsheviks up and down the country, and now things could explode. I don't know what's got into him.

What was I doing there? Guilt glints like a cold blade. Yet why? What have I done that is so wrong? I dip the spoon in and scoop at the glistening stuff. "I told you. I spent a week at my grandmother's house, Aberdeen, on the way back to Brisbane. Madeleine's up there for a holiday."

And he lays down his own spoon. The wood of the table is dark with tobacco smoke, with the sweated forearms of customers. We're so close he could grip my

wrists if he wanted to or hold my hands. There's something waiting to be said and I am trying not to hear it.

I gaze at our neighbour, so caught up in some diatribe or exposition that he doesn't notice us at all and his companion, who links the argument before the other has taken breath, is similarly unaware. For them it's a matter of enjoyment, this battle they seem to wage.

"Isabel," he says quietly.

I slowly look back to him. My stomach tightens and I feel the prickling of heat under my arms. I've brought myself to this. I join my hands and squeeze.

"You didn't write to me. Or send a message of any kind."

Write to him? Is that what's wrong? The skin above his cheeks tightens and I can see bone whiten.

"Lev," I say, softly.

"Why did you go? Why?"

"I told you why." I catch the eye of a woman seated near us. She hugs the steaming tea-glass as she sips and watches. I lower my voice. "I have responsibilities." But I sound empty, even to myself.

He tears bread. I can't bear it, his upset. I reach across to still him and he stops his urgent movement. "Don't let us fight," I say.

"I am not fighting with you, Isabel. What is, is." He slips his hand out from under mine and he pats me as if I'm a child, and my poor hand is left foolish as he picks up the hunk of black bread again.

The woman feels no compunction about her curiosity. She stares openly now as she sips her tea.

I sit back, withdraw to my own side of the table. I can't eat any more of it or I'll be sick. It's the colour as much as anything. It reminds me too much of blood.

The first time he walked me to catch a cab, the night that changed me forever, everything was ahead. He takes my arm now in a more familiar way, urges me to dodge across the road as a tram comes towards us from the bridge. We're moving too fast to alter the destination. He's going to send me away.

"Can we stop for a while?" I say. He steps back from me.

"Here?"

Melbourne Street is still alive, though night has long fallen. It's too hot to stay indoors. Women sit shoeless on front steps, the tea cooked, the washing up done. And young men are wandering about with the air of frustrated children, nowhere to go, nowhere they want to return.

"Somewhere," I say.

He looks at me, nods, and leads me around a corner. A warehouse runs darkly beside a line of trees. Miraculously, as I gaze at their stillness a breeze from the river lifts their leaves, their tender branches. This is right. Away from the smell of town, where we can close our ears to the motor cars, the jangle of trams, feel the sky rise to its proper place. And maybe we will be ourselves and I can touch him and feel him crush me to him as if he's swamped by so much need that I must be gathered and held and never released.

He knows this district well. There's a laneway one can't see from the main road. Our footsteps are loud, echoed from the hovering bulk of the warehouses on either side. There are no street lights. I bump against him and he takes my hand, slowly passes it through the crook of his arm. I rub my nose against his shoulder, an infant restored to its mother. I'm weakened with relief.

And he leads us out to a bit of riverbank that has been somehow mislaid, surrounded on three sides by the ungracious walls of storage houses and on the fourth opening out in a lapping bliss to the river itself, where tree roots are slippery as snakes.

"Do you want to sit?" His voice is intimate out here, clearer.

I look down by my feet but I can't see if the earth is muddied or dry. He lays his jacket on the ground and touches me as a signal. It is grass, cooling with the night. As he settles beside me I look up at the moon, high now, distant, but still undeniable in its perfect brightness.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Lev told me it is I who believe in nothing. Dear God, if he's right! That I believe in nothing at all, down to the very ends of the world, down to the very pit of myself, nothing. I'm so afraid that Christopher might say the same of me, if he could find the words. I can't go back to that life with him, not ever. It's over. Thank God, it's over. I will manage perfectly well. It's a different world these days. Hasn't Madeleine managed well enough on her own? I will too.

I probably should have waited till later this evening, when she and I were relaxed in the drawing room. As it is, Madeleine sits at her small desk in the study, leaving me supplicant on the other side, perched on the edge of a leather armchair. It's hard to take this room seriously, her office. What does she do in here, apart from check the stocks and shares left to her by her father, either to relish the rising figures or keep an eagle eye on her own advisers?

She is coming to the end of Christopher's letter. It is formal, seething. He seethes with rage and I don't blame him. She folds it, taking her time.

I'll have to be plain with him. It's how he works, plain, absolutely direct. Chris, we must understand how ill we are making each other. We must part for both our sakes. That's what I need to say. At least he's home safe, as healthy as when he went away. I didn't know he could be so theatrical. He knows, doesn't he, that we can't go on in this way? Let him tell people what he likes. He needn't worry; he'll be invited everywhere. They'll be dropping in with cakes and bottles of port and only too willing to pronounce that he's better off without me. I don't care, as long as I'm somewhere else.

She leans back in her swivel chair, the envelope a captive bird in her hands, and from the look on her face I wonder at my wisdom. I should have kept the letter to myself.

"Isabel," she breathes, and she gazes seriously at the ivory statue holding down a pile of winged correspondence. Stupidly, it matters to me what she says. It

depends on the direction of the wind, which way Madeleine will point. She's never been any different.

She passes the letter across to me and her eyes are a mystery, filmed with moisture perhaps, or shock. It's surprising how little I feel, holding his words in my hand. The force of his pen, the dip of the nib in the inkpot, tapping it on the lip, the scratch on paper, the balding head bent over it. I should feel more.

"What do you think?" I say. I hear a bird's tiny claws on the sill of the open window.

"What do you ... intend to do?"

"I intend to leave him."

"It will kill him."

"It won't, really." I relax against the leather rest. The bird totters a drunken hop or two on the painted surface, dimly aware of the unlikely environment into which he's wandered. He turns his head sharply, directs a glassy gaze at us with one round eye. I won't tell her of Lev, not yet. It's too precious to me, too wrong.

I say, and it's the truth, "It will kill me to stay."

Madeleine didn't warn me about her Captain. She's been growing quieter these past two or three weeks. I even asked her if she was quite well. And then the invitation arrived one morning. He came in his own car to pick her up, though of course he didn't drive; he has a chauffeur whom he called Corporal Flinders. She and I waited in the sitting room bright with morning sun, as Susan answered the door. Maddie was dressed in a grey silk sprinkled with yellowed flowers, soft as shadows that caught the light as she moved. I suppose my excitement was prurient, this younger man who had clearly turned her head, a flirtation on his part I feel sure, flattered by this butterfly who fluttered about his martial shoulders. I tried to catch her eye as the voices came into us through the verandah window but she was rubbing at a pink fingernail, consumed. It was as the footsteps, mollified by the woollen rug in the hallway, thudded closer that I began to decipher the rhythm. The thought crossed my mind before I stood to ready myself. Even so, when he was finally framed in the doorway I must have displayed my shock. The limp is pronounced and the black patch over his eye could be piratical till one grew used to seeing it. But at first glance it all spoke of imperfection, an unmanly uselessness.

Our expertise at this sort of surprise is advancing, one might say. An explosion caught him on the right side, I reported to myself. His face got away with one raw scar from eye to temple only on one side, and a slight lack of smoothness on the other. As I looked at him, he looked at me. Used to it by now.

Madeleine's voice said, "Captain Mark Simpson. My cousin, Mrs Greene."

"How do you do, Mrs Greene?" he said.

He has a lovely voice, unaffected but educated perhaps. All the same, I barely knew how to reply.

The surprise wasn't him so much, as Madeleine. Is this her latest interest, the wounded soldiery? And yet she placed her hand quietly on his back and said, "Would you prefer to set off right away or have we time for tea?", as if she'd known him intimately for years.

Now that they've gone, her goodbye a hurried thing, her luggage loaded by the corporal chauffeur, Susan sitting primly in the front seat beside him, and in the back the Captain waving an incongruous cane out the window as they drove off, I thank whatever Heavens bring such strokes of luck. I haven't been left by myself in the house this time. The Cook remains as does the handyman/gardener who's barely visible most of the time. Not by myself but not beholden either. I can come and go as I please, without explanation.

I do not intend to let Lev slip away from me. Nothing will stop the inevitability, not my own panic, not the fleetingness of his nature. He is fundamentally alone and needs me deeper than he understands. As for me, I was dead and am now gloriously alive. It will cost the whole world, I know that.

At least the tram's movement creates a breeze of sorts. The river is inert and heavy, oiled with heat. They don't seem to mind it as I do, the native Queenslanders. They sit or even stand in the aisle, talking quite normally among themselves. I'm faint with it. I long to unlace my corset, to rub my soaked back with a towel. And I'm so late that I'll have to rush as soon as I alight. It's likely they've set off already and I'll be reduced to trailing after them. What possessed me to finish off the letter to Christopher? Couldn't it have waited? It's just the thought of him opening the wooden flap of our postbox as he comes in for lunch or peering in his short-sighted way at the mat as he comes through the door in case a telegram has been dropped. He's waiting,

for all his claims of indifference, protestations of busy-ness, the recountings of his sudden turn to sociability.

I've told him everything. Everything. I'm sick to my stomach now. I wish I could rip it up. If only I hadn't walked into the kitchen, handed the envelope to Mrs Fletcher. She glanced at the address. She'd hardly steam it open and read it first, would she? I could have just slipped it into my purse, instead of expecting Jim Fletcher to trot down to the post office in the morning. Mrs Fletcher looked strangely at me when I told her I wouldn't be needing dinner tonight. Surely I have the right to live my own life, without interference even from the cook?

I've nearly missed the stop. As I stand, the tram brakes too suddenly and I fall against a lady's hat. "I'm so sorry," I say and she turns a shocked face towards me. The straw boater slides to her ear.

The aisle is packed now. I hadn't noticed them all getting on. I feel my heel grinding the leather of someone's shoe. "Pardon me," I murmur. I seem to be pummelling my way through this crowd.

The conductor has the look of impatience which some men think is very clever. "Are you right there, ma'am?" he says in what he must consider a subtle irony. If I were a braver woman, I'd kick him in passing and pretend I'd tripped. As it turns out, he takes my wrist and helps me down to the road.

"Thank you," I say out of habit and I hear the bell ring twice.

There is peace as the tram's rollick fades and I can orient myself. I cross the quiet street. The sun beats down with a ferocity I can scarce believe and I haven't brought an umbrella. An umbrella draws attention. It also seems somewhat incongruous, the lady shading her complexion as she marches for the overthrow of just about everything. I don't believe, of course. Lev is quite right. I no more believe in any of this than I do in the life I've lived till now. I could have gone on for the rest of my days without knowing this fundamental posture of mine.

The Methodist church is a pleasant building, red brick, sober and quaint at one and the same time. I don't know how it manages that. Like a little girl with plaits. I must slow down. The rise in the road is taxing me. I'm so grateful for the shade thrown by a thick palm tree. I begin to hear the ruckus now. They are close. I speed up again, my heart excited.

A policeman's hat bumps across the path and down into the gutter beside me where a few decaying leaves are gathered, lying enfolded in one another. I stop and



stare at it. And then a black, greasy head appears, lowers itself before me and the hat is scooped up again from its messy nest. I hear the scattered harshness of the man's breath. As he rises, he gazes at me with pale brown eyes that communicate nothing, not irritation or a smile, nor the mildest curiosity. Not even the dead watch the world like that. He tucks the recalcitrant hat under his arm for safe-keeping and has trotted across the road before I can think of one thing to say.

"I think you should go home, Isabel."

"No! Don't say that. I'll be all right."

"There is going to be trouble this time. I'd prefer you to go." He takes the collar of my white blouse between his fingers, pretending to adjust it. "Please."

I look away. I feel I might cry, and I don't want to make a fool of myself out here. On the Trades Hall steps, two union men walk up and I watch them go inside, close the doors behind them. They have abandoned us. "I don't see what all the panic is about," I manage to say though my throat is choked. I couldn't bear it if he dismissed me.

"Things have changed. They are cracking down on us."

I refuse to look at him. "It seems it's your trade union friends who've changed. Just because they don't want to come out on the march today doesn't mean the rest of us can't go."

"Well, they have their limitations, it seems. They won't march with our flags. They say it's too dangerous. In the present climate."

"In the present climate? What is that supposed to mean?" I am incensed with them, with Lev, with the whole damn thing. All I want to do is walk along beside him. I finally gaze up at him. He betrays me with his eyes, already focused on Vershkov and Yuri Abramovich. He nods to them and they both slowly tear the newspaper pages away from the furled red banners they are carrying.

"Is it just the flags?" I say quite sharply. It is a childish show of temper, I realise that and I'm ashamed. I try to sound reasonable as I say, "If they're the problem, why don't you just leave them behind?"

He stares at me. He is surprised and, I fear, a little disappointed. But I stare him out. "Well?" I question, implacably. How could it turn like this?

"We won't do that," he says quietly.

I am a fool. That's what he's thinking. He is edgy now, wanting to move. I can't hold him any longer. I look down.

"If you're coming, stay very close to me, do you understand?" he says.

Someone bumps me from behind and I stumble into Lev's chest. The crowd is draining away, the children already returning safely home, the unwilling walking off. Lev takes my arm tightly, too tightly, in his grasp. "Are you all right?" he says.

"Yes." I am subdued. I have done enough damage.

"Come, then."

His fingers hurt me as he turns and I must walk quickly beside him. He is unaware, pulsing with a strong energy. There are still hundreds of us left. At least we are not completely deserted. That would break my heart for him.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The mounted police are waiting as we surge around the corner. They are lined up at the far end of the block, the horses shuffling in wary expectation.

The flags ripple and crack as we move forward. The horses are stirrups a step or two towards us, the clang of their shoes on the roadway clattering against the shuffle of our few hundred feet. Lev, stepping quickly behind me, takes my place at the edge of our row. He says nothing. The horses are not easy. The sun slides on the sleek back of a mare, on the soaped saddle, the gleaming irons as her rider raises himself, gains a better seat. They are going to charge.

I am overcome with fear. How could this happen? My arm touches Lev's. He is walking faster now, arrowing for them. Ahead, the flags lower to waist high, pointed outwards. And now the troop breaks into a canter and they come for us.

The flags flail, wind-torn sails, confusing them. Someone has started singing and the tune spreads like rising water. A horse rears as a flag-pole cuts the air in front of him. The Russians hurl their flags about, dragged against the air to the left and then to the right and my heart drums. I am terrified and exhilarated. The horses cannot resist the bewilderment of the jabbing sticks, the red waves of cloth. Their riders, clinging on for dear life, tug them around and their metal shoes ring on the cobbles till the galloping troop disappears around the next corner.

So this is what it feels like, the confidence of inevitability. The sweet power of the victor. The singing is a storm now and we sway together as we march. I am caught up by it. Foot constables trot along beside us, foolish in their shouts, their sweating faces. We flood into Queen Street.

They've re-grouped, ready for us. Shoppers are streaming out, aproned butchers and grocers, shop-girls in prim white blouses illegitimate in their rushed abandonment of posts. They stare at us from the footpaths. Our footsteps echo violently on the woodblock roadway.

The horses are prancing, unwilling. The mounted men, too, seem uncertain. Lev takes my hand, the two soft skins so intimate amidst all this momentous drama. I grip him tight. Just beside us, incongruously, a waving pole catches a constable's helmet, sends it flying straight through the open doorway of Lind's Umbrella Shop and the onlookers, unsure till now of their stance, clap and cheer at the balletic charm. I feel for him, the poor constable, scampering in after it.

The thunder of hooves calls all of us, onlookers and marchers. They're coming for us again. Between the bobbing heads of the rows in front of us, I see a horse falter and go down on one leg. The crowd sighs in sympathy. The tram tracks are slippery as ice.

It is disintegrating around us. Lev's fingers peel away from mine and he veers off to the footpath. I see now what he's seen. A sergeant tears at Yuri's shirt, circling him round like a rag doll. Yuri, inches shorter than his bearded assailant, is trying to make a grab for the dark jacket. As a gang of men miraculously gather to ring them, the two assailants tug at each other and they begin to turn anti-clockwise. Lev stands in the ring as if unsure which of the two to pull off.

"Stop, boys, stop," I hear from somewhere in front of us and I am distracted by the plea. I'm alone now in the crush, still surging forward. I peer between rows of men. At the head of our parade, I can just see a constable facing us as he walks precariously backwards, his arms out wide as if to embrace us. "Stop," he cries again. "Someone will get hurt." And from our own ranks, I hear an Australian voice cry, "I can't stop them."

From our outskirts, onlookers are shoving in to join us. I'm elbowed further to the middle. I've lost sight of Lev. I can see nothing but the bunched shoulders of men in front of me. I know I mustn't fall. I hold my hands up, as a child would, ready to clutch at anyone if I stumble. Suddenly my nose bumps against a sweat-soaked shirt. We are brought to an untidy standstill.

I feel breathless. I turn to the stranger beside me and say, "What's happening?" He is on tip-toes, his fist resting on somebody's head, peering over the mob. He doesn't look down to me as he says, "They're talking to the coppers."

The tight pack of bodies, swelled now with the prurient, the bored and those of quickly-ignited passions, raises the heat unbearably. Perspiration trickles down my forehead. I wish I'd carried my umbrella. My eyes leak from the horrendous glare of the sun.

I look upwards to the fairy-tale grandeur of the theatre. It should be in a snowy landscape, icicles hanging from its eaves and its fantastic crevasses, sleighs slewing to a stop at its great doors, and candles glistening welcomes behind the myriad panes of glass as diamonds glitter in our ears and on our fingers.

I can barely think in this atmosphere. I'm afraid I might faint.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

The sun is low in the west now, the pandemonium behind us on the other side of the river. I am exhilarated. I have been on the knife-edge. There is a brilliance in the dying light, an almost overwhelming beauty in the massed green and lilac and orange of the sky.

Lev's arm is linked through mine and I secretly squeeze its strength against the side of my breast. Lucy Vershkov walks along slowly with us, her hand resting on his other arm. She is very tired. Young and all as she is, she's too heavily pregnant for the rigours of the past hours. Lev has meandered in an easy stride for the past ten minutes and I catch him glancing down at her occasionally. He has delayed us in the shade of a building or under an awning on the pretext of shaking out his kerchief, wiping the back of his neck. And now he breaks away from me, and my lonely hand drops. He pretends a need to light his pipe, walks a few yards away from us and stands casually with his back to us as she catches her breath.

I'm slightly in awe of her, silly since I am twenty years older. She's everything that I'm not, never was, at least until today. But somehow the baby in her womb, its recently obvious protrusion as if asserting its dominance over her, and an edge of frailty in her eyes that I hadn't noticed before, even the smallness of her hands and the fuzz of tiny curls at her widow's peak and about her temples has restored a balance between us. I see her now as she more truly is and admire her the more for it. Taking my cue from Lev's hidden care for her, I fan a leaflet in wide sweeps in front of my face and it may seem accidental that she gets most of its breeze. We both rest and watch Lev as he idles at the corner, tapping his pipe as if he has all the time in the world.

"A cup of tea would be nice," I say.

"Yes, or a glass of water."

But our voices are pale and self-conscious in the quiet of this Sunday evening solitude, the unnerving emptiness of the back street.

"We're almost there," I offer.

Even that has given her some satisfaction. She closes her eyes as I fan the taut pages more vigorously.

Lev walks silently back to us. He waits as I wave my wrist back and forth until she opens her eyes. He speaks to her in Russian. "Ready?" perhaps, and she nods.

The tenement where she and her Pyotr live is too close to the boarding house, to Katherine Martin, for my peace of mind. Yet I can't bear to leave. We climb the narrow staircase to their apartment. The reek of Russian food, cabbage and garlic and sour bread, oozes from under other doors. I hear a man's voice, low and pure. He is moving about inside his room, his boot leathers squeaking at each step. He is answered by the higher tones of a woman, peaceful inside their own walls. We climb further up.

Lev feels for the key on the ledge above the door. As he pushes it open, the hinges groan. The room is alive with dust mites swaying in the light of the setting sun, and the French windows are oiled with a dull orange. It's a hot box in here.

"Open them, Lev, please," Lucy says.

And I too long for air, whether it brings storms of moths or not.

The balcony is narrow but nevertheless there are two chairs perched out there and pots of greenery. She's made a home for herself and her husband, little Lucy, their island. On the dresser I see a jug covered with a muslin cloth and beside it a tray of Russian tea-glasses encased in a silver-plated filagree.

She has reached the end of her resilience, pulls out a chair from the table and sits awkwardly as she splays a hand behind her aching waist. The water pours in a delicious stream. I carry a glass over to her and she holds out her hand greedily. A trickle slides down her chin as she drinks. I leave her to regain herself and take ours out on to the balcony.

Lev taps his glass against mine. We are alone again. "A good day, after all that. Perhaps things will calm down," I say.

He seems strangely happy, at ease. "We are close," he says.

I don't know what it is that prickles at me, my uncertainty of his intention in the remark, his gazing away as he says it, the silence as he holds the water to his lips but doesn't yet drink.

The water is warm. But better than nothing.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Lev is like a caged lion. He's only here because of me, dispatched to guard the women when he'd prefer to be out there somewhere in the night. I understand that, but his fever disturbs me. And hurts me.

We pulled the table over to the doorway and a light breeze obliged us. It carries the stink of the river, but even that suggests some movement of air. A while ago Lucy retired to the dark corner of the room and, while Lev stepped out to the balcony again, she disrobed and shrugged a light cotton shift over her head.

When she sat at the table again, I brushed out her fine brown hair and pinned it high off her neck. Her brush is delicate, the bristles thinning from long use yet it is silver, I'm sure. I wonder where she came upon it? It slid through her long hair as if it were more than a little in love with it and strands adhered to it, fascinated, falling so slowly that I became hypnotised myself. When something alerted my senses, I looked up to see Lev in the night's blackness watching me, the sizzling red glow of his pipe fading as he held it forgotten on the railing.

But now, the bread broken on the table, a spiced sausage half eaten lying beside the stained knife, and the tea poured and refilled and drunk again, he can hardly bear to be here. This is what I want, the shared meal, the end-of-day laziness, the creeping tenderness I feel in this place. When Lucy at last retired to her bed in the corner, exhausted, I sighed with pleasure. Even this little privacy is a consummation.

Yet everything in him draws against it. He sits only to stand again. I don't know what it is he's waiting for.

And then a whistle comes from the street. He responds in an instant. To my surprise, the quiet figure of Lucy rises from her bed. I hear the voice then. I don't recognise it. When they speak Russian their whole tone changes, the pitch even. Lev leans over the balcony, answering back in a coarse whisper.

Lucy has come across the room. The light from the kerosene lamp illuminates her bulbous shape through the pale cotton of her shift that for a moment is as



transparent as the empty tea-glass in my hand. It's Pyotr Vershkov, of course. She steps barefoot into the open air.

Is this banter, or something much worse? Lev stands with a military tension, a hardness in his back and arms. He turns and sees me watching him. He speaks in English as he crosses the threshold.

"I want you to wait here. Stay with Lucy. Don't go outside, do you promise me?"

I nod. It's not knowing that frightens me. If I knew the details of the danger, I would be all right. Nothing is as bad as one thinks.

He takes my shoulders in his hands and kisses my forehead. "Don't worry," he says more softly. I must look terrified. "But you must stay here until I come for you. There's a mob of returned soldiers across the bridge. Many hundreds, he says, and mad for blood. I think you can't go home tonight."

That is what I've wanted all along. And so I nod and say, "I'll stay."

"Make sure she doesn't come down," he says and he glances at Lucy who still leans over the balcony, speaking quietly to her husband in the street below.

"I think we'd better turn down the lamp."

I've been standing outside. Over the long minutes, Lucy has decided to become the younger woman to my older, and I can't quite put my finger on why. The fragility of her pregnancy is an element, I assume. She obediently twists the wheel of the wick, lifts the glass shade and blows out the flame.

"The police are arriving," I say. "It will be all right."

We're in darkness now, except for the dim reflection of the streetlight. I see her hand drop to her stomach but she doesn't speak.

I've become calm. I don't believe we'll be hurt. This mob is none too sober, or many among them aren't at any rate, and they are het up. But they are Australian boys, soldiers every one of them, about whom we pored over newspaper reports for five years, prayed for, knitted socks and underclothes for. That is all this mob is. A stern word from the police and they will go home. It was only for a moment as the first of them turned into the street that I felt panic. But common sense has been restored.

"Why don't you lie down again, Lucy? You might as well rest." She puts up no resistance as I lead her to the bed and when she's settled as comfortably as she can,

she allows me to cover her with a soft shawl. Her moist eyes look up at me and seem huge and black in this distorted light. I touch her arm. "I'll keep a good watch on things," I say and she nods like a small girl, as if my gaze on the mob could scatter them like dried leaves. "Rest," I soothe.

I walk quietly towards my post, but a kitchen chair in my path has become almost invisible in the dark and I brush against it. Its feet scrape against the boards. "Damn," I mutter. It seems imperative to keep the room in silence.

The noise outside begins to rise. It sounds like the dusty run of spooked cattle. Anxious not to worry her, I step out quickly and close the balcony door behind me. I hardly believe what I see.

They are still pouring in from around the corner. Surely the police will stop them? But they are so few. How can they possibly defend us? Across the road, the lights of the hall have been dimmed.

The mob breaks into a run and the din becomes overwhelming. "Lev," I shout. "Lev." Quite uselessly.

A crack rings out, whips the night into a falling silence. I can't find my voice. I push myself back against the cooling bricks. Was it a shot?

I see him now, the gunman. He's one of ours, stepping out from the darkness of the hall's garden path. He leans his body around the side of the paling fence, fires again into the air. The shot chills the entire street, the maddened mob, the useless police lolling about the crossroad, we in the houses and apartments breathlessly listening.

I hear the balcony door behind me open. Her face is whitened in the electric glare of the streetlight.

"What has happened?" she says. She's panting as if she's run, as if she's scared.

Her bare arm touches mine, our skin damp in the dank heat. "They've stopped," I say. But as I speak we hear someone shout, quite near us.

"We're the police. We're coming in," a man's voice is saying.

Lucy and I hold grab other's hand. The wooden gate across the road slowly opens. Beneath the greenery overhanging the side fence we can now see a long, dark queue of men, hidden in the shadows. I strain to make out Lev's shape, but it's impossible. A few of them come forward to meet the three policemen who now stand at the gateway.

“They won’t protect them,” Lucy says.

“Of course they will.” She’s overwrought and, like all of them, inclined to see the worst. I gaze down the street at the heaving mob, hundreds, perhaps thousands of them. I sense them bucking and sliding like young, restless animals. At least the gun shots have stopped them in their tracks. “They’re moving back, see,” I say.

And incredibly the front rows have turned, are in retreat. It’s over. Only a handful of them walk forward in formation, as if they’re a military parade. Directly beneath our balcony, two men suddenly appear, move out into the middle of the street.

“Do you see? Those two are military intelligence,” Lucy says.

I don’t know why the unexpected appearance of those dark, secretive shapes sickens me. I’ve been standing over their heads in blithe innocence. I feel quite stupid. Angry too. Angry at Lucy in all her worldly-wise youth.

“How can you know who they are? Why would military intelligence be here?” I am sharp with her. “You’re not saying they’re in on it?”

“Not officially. Who knows who’s behind it? They’d do anything to get rid of us. They’re afraid of us now, since the revolution. They know our Red Army is winning all of Russia.”

“It’s just a drunken mob, Lucy, for goodness sake,” I say.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

**I** would have felt an intruder if it weren't her husband who'd asked me to remain the night in their apartment. Hours ago, he'd slipped into the room. He went immediately to sit beside his wife and I, a little embarrassed, pretended to straighten my hair in front of the pock-marked mirror nailed by the door. Pyotr and Lucy whispered, their heads together as they sat at the table.

Then he got up, walked over to me and said in his formal English that he strongly recommended my reposing at their home overnight. Also he said, probably out of kindness more than anything else, it would relieve his mind to know his Lucy was not alone. He must tell me further it was Lev Andreyevich's concern that I refrain from venturing out and he begs me to wait till morning when he will come. I mumbled my acceptance and then quietly walked out on to the balcony. When I returned some minutes later, she and I were again alone.

We left the French doors open, the air growing cooler as the night deepened. I slept fitfully till the sun woke me. Lucy's body gave off heat and she'd lumbered uncomfortably from side to side till now she snored softly, her face against the wall. I lay for an hour, aware of the strong nearness of Lev across the street, down the pathway with its slumbering climbing plants. They would be talking quietly, smoking, taking it in turns to stand outside the gate. Or lying on the floor of the hall, their jackets rolled under their heads, closing their eyes for a while.

I wash as silently as I can, holding the towel against me so I don't splash my petticoat. I've poured a few drops of my toilet water into the bowl and its perfume drugs me, or perhaps it's lack of sleep. I feel as if my edges no longer hold, are afloat, a part of the air. Lev will come soon.

Her voice is small. "Did you sleep?" she says.

I turn my head. "On and off. And you? You seemed to."

With some degree of difficulty, she turns towards me. Her hair is loose on the pillow. "I think I did. It's quiet."

"I had a look out earlier. There's no one about. I'll make us a pot of tea."

She closes her eyes and says, “Thanks.” She raises her arms above her head, stretches. I gargle as quietly as I can, inhibited by her wakefulness, and spit the lavender-tinged water into the bowl, wipe my mouth.

“What time is it?”

“About ten,” I say.

“Oh, my God. How did I sleep so long? Mrs Greene, there’s bread and some honey my mother sent me in the press. I’ll get it in a minute.”

“I’ll find it. You stay there.”

I fold the dampened towel neatly and poke it over the washstand rail. I’m barefoot, naked under the petticoat, yet I feel no urge to dress. Her kitchen, what there is of it, is neat and scrubbed. The painted woodwork of the dresser shines with cleanliness. She’s a woman of many parts, Lucy. Her mother’s jar of honey rests on a saucer. It has crystallised on the bottom, a whitish sediment, and the rest is clear as pale tea. As I unscrew the lid the smell of sweetness, of something burnished, draws me and I sniff at the bottle like child.

“When did your husband die, Mrs Greene?” she says.

I put the jar back down on the saucer, open the drawer and peer in. There are three sharpened knives pointed inwards. I slowly take out the bread knife.

“He’s not dead,” I say.

“Oh,” I hear, and then she’s silent.

The army vehicles arrived about half an hour ago as we were making the bed, she on one side of the mattress, me on the other, the sheet billowing between us. As we heard the roar of the engines, the slammed doors, raised voices, some strange agreement allowed us to tuck the sheet in and even for me to run my hand over it, smoothing wrinkles, before we went outside to the balcony. My first thought was naive. The police have arrived to ensure no damage was done last night, to discuss the volatility of that momentary lapse, to offer assistance. But my eyes knew better. Fourteen men had driven up and not one was a state policeman. They are military. Why would they feel fit to call on a private establishment?

Then the mayhem began. They marched back down the path from the Russian hall with papers and pamphlets in their arms, dumped their booty into their cars and van. I had to hold Lucy as she tried to open the door of the apartment.

“You’re not dressed, Lucy, stop,” I said to her.

“I’ll get dressed,” she said as she looked down at her belly, the distended naval clear as a bell between the hangs of the faded dressing gown, a hand-me-down most likely. She gazed down as if she’d only just recognised herself.

“No, no,” I said as I put my arm about her shoulder and forcefully led her back to the table. “Sit down here, why don’t we? And we’ll wait. Your husband will let you know what’s happening.”

The expression on her face was angry and, shall I say, bewildered? I felt the same. I wanted to cradle her. I made another cup of tea, the only thing left to do, and as the steam rose and the kettle’s lid popped like a tin hat sliding about on the head of a drunken soldier, we continued to listen to the voices across the street, the squeal of the gate’s hinges. She picked up a sugar cube from her crystal bowl, sucked on it as if she barely knew it was between her teeth, and then raised the hot tea to her lips.

And so I was still in my petticoat when the stairs began to thunder and the door rudely opened. We stared at them, both of us holding our tea glasses between our hands. Just for a moment, the two men hesitated. Then another three clattered in behind them and they too stopped, stared back at us.

My corset was laid on the chair just inside the door. My dress was tented over it but didn’t entirely hide it, and my rolled stockings were perfectly obvious, tucked into the shoes lined up on the floor beneath. I gripped the glass against my breast, my bare arms the only modesty available to me. Their eyes did not fail to drink us in, one man after another. The lascivious glance of a man, how petrifying that can sometimes be. It brings with it the dawning acknowledgement that danger has been there all along, blindly ignored, a knowledge that creeps up from a cold, stony place.

One of them looked away almost immediately. He was the superior officer as it turned out, dressed in civilian clothes. He broke out of his reverie and shouted an order. I barely took in the words. The feet of Lucy’s chair scratched at the bare boards and I saw her struggle to rise. He came over to us.

“We have to search the premises,” he said, and he glanced at her stomach. “If you just stay where you are.” He faltered, gazed at me as if he were uncertain of his role. “Or if you’d like to step outside.”

He blushed, realising his mistake, because we cannot step out like this, undressed. “Sorry to disturb you,” he said.

Lucy refused to meet his eyes. She looked pointedly at the corner of the room, where already the drawers of her dressing bureau had been opened, things spilled out. The knitted cream bed-jacket she had shown me that her mother made for her, the wool so soft I could almost feel it against my cheek, was thrown on the floor. A ball of black stockings was tossed to the rug, rolling twice before it halted at another man's boot. Lucy watched it as if mesmerised. The officer followed her gaze, stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out a notepad. It restored him. He moved away.

The clamour of the cutlery drawer, so violent and unexpected, made me want to cry. The clumsy oaf dropped it, the whole lot collapsing to the floor, carving knives, the heavy rod of the sharpener, forks, spoons. I stared at an egg-cup on the top shelf of the dresser, a shepherd boy carved in painted ceramic, the shawl-like shape of a white lamb slung across his shoulders. Why have they only one egg-cup, I wondered? It became a matter of importance that, since it was so alone, it should not be carelessly shattered. I didn't see Lev enter the room.

"Come," his voice says beside me.

I turn my head and stare at him, surprised and yet unmoved as if perhaps I had turned to him in a dream. I can't open my mouth to explain that I'm not dressed and so I can't leave. He's taken my arm and I feel the slippery moisture of my own skin. My legs are foreign to me, shaky, forgetful. But he straightens me up and a cloth falls silkily around my back, over my breast. It is green, heavy even in the gossamer touch of it. As he walks me like a dolly across the room, I realise it's the shawl from Lucy's bed.

"My clothes," I whisper. The garments seem embarrassed by their own blatant vulnerability. Even the military police have found them too afire with privacy to fondle, to peek amongst.

He bundles them up, the shoes bulkily wrapped inside my dress, and tucks the parcel under his arm. I think he speaks a few words to one of the officers. He guides me, a hand about my waist, out to the landing.

Pyotr is coming up two steps at a time. He knocks into me as if he hasn't seen me. I look over my shoulder and watch him rush into the room, take Lucy in his arms. Lev tightens his hold on me and we begin to descend, one tentative step after another. As we reach the return, I gaze up and see the figure of an officer above us. He leans

over the banister and watches us. I cannot take my eyes off him, but Lev keeps me moving on down.

“What do they want?” I whisper urgently when I can no longer see him.

“They want us gone, Isabel. Someone does, anyway.”

“I thought they wouldn’t let any of you leave.” I have raised my voice. I think I sound hysterical. “Why are they here, anyway? We’re not the ones who caused the trouble. They should be finding some of those hooligans from last night, instead of coming around here, disturbing everyone.”

I look up, crane my head trying to see the officer above us again and I say louder, “Who’s in charge of those boys, I’d like to know? Letting them roam about like that all night, getting drunk and attacking innocent people. Someone should take charge of them and tell them to stop.”

“Ssh,” Lev says gently.

We seem to have stopped outside someone’s flat. He knocks. I move very close to him, breathe the summer heat from his body, feel the warm crispness of his shirt on my cheek.

I have no idea who this old woman is, who must have been standing, waiting inside her door before Lev raised his hand. Her fingers beckon me like the incanting fingers of a witch and I have no resistance to her. She takes me from him as if I myself am a message relayed, and almost pushes me towards the corner of her room. The bundle of my clothes appears in her hands. She places it on a tapestry-covered footstool – a piano stool perhaps, though there seems to be no piano. I am suddenly enclosed by the panels of a rosewood screen.

I’m intrigued by the patterns in the wood, the dips and bumps which seem to tell a story of some kind, but I cannot understand its meaning. I pick up my clothes and sit on the stool. Slowly, I begin to ease a stocking up my leg.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

The hall has the appalled jokiness of a cornfield ravaged by crows. The underside of chairs, bare legs stuck up in the air, reveal too much. The velvet stage curtain lies in a crimson pool, vandalised by boot prints. Our steps sound offensive as we walk down the length of the room towards the others. There's no anger in the lowered voices.

Yuri is bent like a coolie over his crops, patiently picking up an armful of books. He drops one as he rises and it splatters to the floor, its spine broken. He sees us, tries to smile. I can't believe the destruction of his face, one eye almost closed, puffed out of recognition, a red cut breathlessly close to the socket. His mouth is swollen and the first purplings show themselves under his dark whiskers. I'm ashamed to look at him.

"It's not as bad as it looks," he says through his thickened lips. Someone has said it to him earlier and he's learned the English phrase off.

I smile, too, to accommodate him. I should do something, bathe his wounds, apply ointment, but the truth is I've no idea how to deal with it. Anyway, most probably a person of competence has already attended to him overnight. I lean down to retrieve the broken book. Lev lightly touches my hip and says, "I'll be back in a few minutes." I brush my fingers against the dirtied cover as I watch him join a group of men gathered in a loose ring, talking.

"What about you?" Yuri says.

"I'm all right," I say, surprised.

"They didn't hurt you?" He reaches out to take the book. His knuckles are raw as if he'd fallen off a horse and slid down into a gully.

"The military people? No. Why would they?"

He stares at me though what is going through his mind I cannot read. I can't bear to stare too much at that face. "Let me help you with these," I say.

There are books scattered everywhere. He's already made a series of uneven piles on the table. He turns from me and makes yet another, straightens it squarely

between his boyish hands. "Thank you. You are so kind," he says. He rubs his dirty palms against the sides of his trousers, though they are even more stained. "There are more near the door. They dropped them on the way out."

"I'll do those," I say. He has an innocence, Yuri. There is a naïve adoring in the way he looks at the world, at women, at any kindness whatsoever. Even through the swellings, the cut skin, I can see the wonder in his eyes. Surely he will be terribly hurt. I feel for him on that day, feel a trembling sympathy.

It's lonely walking away. A silent wall of motes spills in with the light from the door, a defiance of the air. The books are clustered in the corner, tossed there, not accidentally dropped. The casual malice of it sickens me. That one man could enjoy his contempt of another! Wait till the authorities hear of it, this disrespectful behaviour. The Russians saved their shillings for these books, one by one, so Lev told me. It's a pure disgrace.

"Mrs Greene!" a voice says, startling me.

I face the door, the sun in my eyes, seven books in my arms. The man's figure is dark, hazed.

"I saw you yesterday, at the march." He steps into the room.

"Stephen! Good Lord."

"I came by when I heard."

"Were you down the road, at Katherine's?"

He swoops down and picks up the remainder of books as if they are a fanned pack of cards. I'm bewildered by his presence here. But slowly the pieces fit. He's a radical now, of course.

He doesn't quite look at me as he says, "No. She won't see me."

"Katherine won't see you? Why?"

For just a brief second our eyes meet. "Where shall I put these?" he says.

I nod my head towards where Yuri patiently is gathering a book here, a book there. We move up together, uneasy. I gaze at his polished shoes, the flap of his trouser hems. Did he see me with Lev yesterday? Most certainly he did.

The water is warm. I sit under an over-hanging branch, its lower leaves lapping in the current which I would otherwise not perceive. They float flat as boats and then lift, dripping, the green wood tugging like a fishing line against the breeze and the subtle tide. The leaves drop again, straining towards the sea. My toes and ankles are pearly

white under the surface. I sway my feet from side to side. I feel I could walk on this water, I am so light, the river as much a part of me as the sun in my eyes.

If we were alone, I'd touch my hand to his face, feel the sponginess of my palm against the sharpness of his cheek. My fingers would feel again the shocking, unexpected softness of his forehead, hidden by a fall of hair so dark that I am lost in it. It was that shock which first, of all things, split my heart open to this man, this man so rawly tender in himself. No one could love him as I love him.

I have barely slept; none of us have. But I don't want to lose these moments. I want to stay awake forever. Lev takes up his glass, sips at his vodka. He's watching me from under his lowered lids.

Yuri saved the bottle for a special occasion. It seems this is it. He's lying on the grass, an arm over his face. Perhaps he's dozing. His chest doesn't move. Yuri had the worst of it. We gather around him as if he's the one chosen to take all our sufferings and we minister to him and are afraid of him.

The sun has shifted its position so surreptitiously that I'm surprised to notice it grown large in the west, beginning to change the bleached blue around it to a sulphurous orange. I want to delay, to distract the others from the clock. I can't bear to be sent home now. He's said it's possible I might stay again in Lucy's apartment, though her husband has taken her on the tram to her mother's house. I will stay there, why not? And Lev can spend hours with me there. That's what he's thinking too. He slides his boot along the dust, raises his knee. He settles his head back against the tree trunk. I hear my breath and the ridiculous cry of a seagull as it skims the water, buoyant in its hunger.

I have been wrong about Marina all along, just as I've been wrong about almost everything in my life. She watches Yuri like a mother, fed him torn off slivers of bread soaked in fish roe, eased them through his swollen lips. Whom she loves, who loves her, I don't know. Her story must be as deep as the forests Lev has told me about, and as silent to me as the sleeping earth under a continent of snow.

We all wait, a little army strewn out along the bank, mellowed with exhaustion, with the sun, with the sensation of lying together in the late summer afternoon, dipping bread, passing the volcanic bottles from one to the next. I curl up on the ground, my chest against the smooth, rock-like vein of a root, the side of my face pressed into it. I want to kiss it passionately and long, this darling root entirely mine as my blood and my skin and Lev's skin are mine, and entirely all I've ever

desired. I wish that he could come to me now and his shadow lower itself to me, the weight of his body take the rise and fall of my breath.

It is broken. I sense the first movements, the shift in the air. He stands over me, his hand out. I sit, my head dizzy, and reach up. The others are beginning to stretch their legs, wipe at the twigs and leaves clinging to their clothes. Yuri grunts as he leans forward, ready to rise. His bruising has fully flowered, almost beautiful.

I don't know how the secrets of one side of this simmering war come to the ears of the other. But they know as fact that guns have been supplied to about forty of the soldiers from last night, and they know as fact that a force is gathering to march on them again tonight. Bigger, they say, much bigger. It may all be bluff. The wind goes out of people's sails.

The pillowcase is damp beneath my cheek, wet from the uncouth dribble of a drugged sleep. The moment of waking in the early evening is the loneliest moment in the world, darkness already falling. That pause between sudden consciousness and the forced acceptance of the air, the room, the house, seems to be where death hides. How often I slept in the afternoon during all those terrible years.

But I'm in a different room. I stretch in a tangle of sheet, the sheer childish pleasure of the pull of bone and muscle. Lev left before I dozed off. I remember now. I place my hand over the damp patch, rest my chin on it and gaze around. The pieces of furniture are still shadows, not yet lost to sight. What was it that woke me? A train, perhaps? Is it possible to hear a train from Lucy's place?

I sit up quickly. It is them. They're coming again.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

*T*hey are one gigantic, echoing breath. And under it, a sound like the roll of drums. Quick, repetitive thuds. My own heart beats violently. I should dress, not be caught out again. Better not to light the lamp. In the privacy of our brief time together my clothes were dropped carelessly, the dress laid too casually across a chair's seat, the hem flowering over the rug. The rest of my things are rather shameless on the bare boards of the floor. I perch on the edge of the bed, tug the corset around me and reach down for a stocking.

By the time I'm barely decent and standing at the balcony doorway, I know they are almost upon us. As I open the French windows a breeze blows in, tinged with coolness, and I realise the room is a hot house trapping the heat of the day.

I'm hesitant to go outside. I stand on my toes and try to peek around towards the end of the street where they appeared last night. Amazingly it seems empty. Nearer, I see a woman run lightly from her gate, shoo a posse of children who've been standing in a kind of awe and they obey her, two of them tagging behind her, the rest scattering into their own homes. The sound is quite terrifying, the slow approach of a dragon, breathing fire.

I have to look. Beneath me, there are two rows of policemen, silent statues, dark and flimsy as bats. In the glow of the streetlight, blades of bayonets glisten like oil. They chill me, those fleeting figures. Yet they are here to protect, after all, aren't they? I glance to my left and see another cluster of them, more haphazard, at the next junction. We are boxed in.

The Russian hall is completely silent, not a glimmer of light. Yet they are there. Something makes me look back up. The lead echelons of the mob have wheeled around the corner, at the trot. Feet stamp at the ground, the drum beat that woke me, the whip of cloth, the slap of leather. They keep coming. My God, there are thousands of them. We are lost.

Two dozen police. Does Lev realise? Should I risk a run across to the hall? The mob slows. They've seen the fixed bayonets, the shoddy welcoming committee at

the crossroad. Still more of them are pouring into the street but a hush rumbles back along the lines.

They move again, swelling up into the front ranks, shoulder-tight. They advance across the no-man's-land of the intersecting roads. The police are absolutely still. They will be walked over.

All hell breaks loose. They're shouting, stampeding. I hear the crack of wood as they begin to peel palings off fences. One monkey-like shape dangles from a tree bough, swinging against its seasoned grip on the trunk. As it shatters, he falls out of sight and the bough collapses over him, the leaves shaking as they sigh through their descent.

A police officer has fallen, too, forced backwards till he lost his footing. I watch him anxiously as he heels his way to safety before heaving himself to his feet, the butt of his rifle giving leverage. I think he's seen me. He seems to hesitate for a moment. Then he throws his weapon up under his arm and walks slowly towards to his men. Their tight-locked position bulges like a catapult.

Someone screams in pain. Mounted police are storming into the back of the mob. The horses create waves of heaving around them and the mob parts. Men at the front turn their heads almost in disbelief. Perhaps we are saved after all.

The crowd seems so disoriented that they give way under the massive chests and bellies, the determined power of the rippling legs. Suddenly the horses break through and I can finally hear the iron of their shoes, the snorts and bellowed-breaths of their lungs as they canter between the breaking police lines. Their riders rein their heads around, eyes bulging with fear, and they are turned for another thrust. The foot police part again to give them passage and they charge headfirst into the mob.

There will be a blood bath. It's the most dreadful noise I have ever heard. I am holding my hands up over my ears like a child.

Women seem to have appeared along the footpaths, foolishly. Katherine! Is she there? I pray she has the sense to stay inside, in her own room at the back of the boarding house. She should pull the bed across to block the door, or her chest of drawers. I should have thought of her earlier. I can't possibly reach her now.

Are they exploding crackers? A horse seems to stagger. He's down. The crowd panics around him and I can't see what's happening to the poor creature. A firework explodes again.

No, of course not. Gun fire.

My foot slips on the threshold as I back inside. A stray bullet could kill anyone, the women who've tagged along, a child. They've gone quite mad.

A shooting star hurls through the evening, raggedly flaming, and I hear the clatter of tin on the roadway. The star is followed by another, arcing a different course. The biting wind of its fiery devouring is uncannily loud. As I watch it hit the roof of the Russian hall, see it Catherine-wheel down the slope of it, I understand that there is no hope at all. It's all a flaring conflagration, from the very beginning to the end.

Lev will escape. They're not fools enough to be burned alive. I shall sit here on the floor and wait. The hinged edge of the balcony door cuts into my back. I won't move. It's real and solid and tells me I'm alive. Somehow a tiny pebble has found its way here too and I rub it between my finger and thumb. It is sharp, sliced off from some bigger entity. The sky rains fence palings. They thunder as they land, thud against the roof, the wall, shatter windows. I crawl further inside the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

When the door bursts open, I'm almost prepared. If they come, I've been saying to myself, I will speak quietly to them and when they hear my voice, my accent, they'll apologise and stumble out, embarrassed. And now the door opens in the darkness and there is only one figure. I stare at it and I can't get the words out.

"Isabel." He walks over to me, sits on the floor and pulls me into his chest. I can feel his heart beating. He kisses my hair again and again. My fingers dig into his arm, his neck. He begins to rock me, or I him, I'm not sure which.

"We have to go," he whispers.

We both stagger as we try to stand, helping each other. "How did you get in?" I say.

"Through the back. The others are waiting for us, quick."

I place my palms on his whiskered cheeks and I kiss him. Again I am on the very edge of vitality, razor-sharp with it. He induces in me a reality completely devoid of pretence. I have been pretending all my days, even to myself. He moves his lips against mine, his smoky breath shooting sparks to the depths of me and our noses are bone to bone. I am absolutely true, at last.

Stephen Ferguson was always the darling of the Tablelands. Many's the woman who tugged on his childish mop of black curls at shops doors, on church steps, in his mother's parlour. It's inevitable that as he grew those women grew coy.

I wanted to lay my hand on his head, pluck at the silky strands till they played some deep melody in me. But I didn't. The boy ached a sore spot, whatever it was about him. I smiled at a distance, commented like the others on how he'd drive the girls mad one day, how he had his father wrapped around his little finger. Everything handed to him, the looks, the temperament, money earned by the sweat of his father and even more his grandfather.



But he was a good boy, always. If he was aware that his casual ways collided with the town's niceties, he never let on. I think he knew well enough. No one had the heart to chastise him. His parents had aspirations for their treasure. But he didn't bother about who should fraternise with whom. He palled up with the Martins, for instance. He'd lounge around on the floor playing marbles with the boys, and with Katherine too come to think of it, while Norah Martin stepped over him as if he were only another of her raucous brood. And in the end, marriage to one of them. He broke his mother's heart, I fear.

Heaven knows how much the Martins' politics infected him, Norah's hot-tempered ranting, the religious fervour of their idealisms, the warrior rage burning like bush fire. And I could never cross that courteous chasm. Stephen crossed it, that's the difference. If he'd met up with a thousand Russian captains in France, they barely could have converted him more from where he already stood. The Martins had branded him a long time ago.

And now this. Now Katherine. As the two of them appear in the illumination of the street lamp, I finally see it.

He carries a tapestried Gladstone bag, crammed hastily with some of her things I expect, and his arm is about her shoulder pulling her close. I doubt they've noticed me. Lev said we must wait for them, for Stephen to climb over the back fence of the boarding house, get her out before the mob decides to attack and tear up the bedrooms where the Russians slept. I wanted to go down myself. No, they'll be safe enough, he'd said. After all, the boy is one of them, as battered by war as any of them. How are they to know his politics, unless he chooses to say? And so we waited in the dark, pushed up against this fence under the dangling web of a weeping willow.

As they come closer, I watch as Stephen's fingers brush at her cheek. Has she been crying? If this is as it seems, a catastrophe has befallen them. It was set in motion even before the war, inexorable. They'd been as close as boy and girl could be and yet retain innocence. I remember the stab of bewilderment when his engagement to her sister was announced. I remember asking myself how I didn't notice it happening, Mary and Stephen? There was something said about a day at the horse races, a blushing re-telling by the beautifully plump Mary as she told the story again and again. Women listened and admired her ring, admired it and envied it. And secretly raised their eyebrows.

Was Katherine too young? Outshone by her older sister in those naïve days? Or, stubborn as she is and not half as familiar with her own heart as she thinks she is, had she turned him down, sent him away with a sting? It was the war, the romantic desperation of it. It had been a mad thing, that quick marriage to the elder sister, and everyone knew it. But now Mary is his wife, waited for him as he disappeared among numbers at the Front, sat up till dawn with their baby at her breast, praying for his return.

I am more than cross with these two. But if love has hit them, stolen their peace, destroyed all possibility of an outcome to satisfy any one? Then I'm afraid they are doomed. They should never have done it. One can walk away early in the piece while it's still nothing more than a mild fever, which a sleepless night or two will sweat out. Silly children, playing with fire.

"Mrs Greene!" She stops dead and Stephen's hand drops from her.

I can see her eyes now, glistening in the warm darkness. She is distracted for a moment by Yuri who appears from under willow fronds, looking ghastly to her I expect. Confused, she looks back to me.

"Which way?" Stephen says, addressing Lev in a quiet urgency. Neatly, he switches her bag to his left hand, putting some distance between the two of them.

"We should head for the river and get down a few blocks," Lev says as he takes my arm, thoughtlessly enough, and I see him silently nod Yuri on. He rushes me so quickly and lightly across the road that the hiss of my silk dress and rustle of the lawn petticoat sound more than my footsteps.

What a fraud I am, running like a cat through the streets. I'm too old for love, too disinterested for revolution. This is all an act for me. When Katherine looked straight into my face a minute ago, she saw me for what I am. A married lady of no perceptible talent, a withering flower whose best bet is to be pressed inside the pages of a book.

Yuri has disappeared around the corner, almost silent on his feet. A moment later I hear the brutal slap of boots and I know that trouble has come upon us. My arm feels the loss of Lev's warm grip. He tears away from me, rounds the corner too and is gone from sight. Behind me, I hear a thud as if some weight has fallen and my shoulders cringe.

Stephen bumps me as he passes and he says, "Stay here."

I turn to Katherine. She bends slowly to pick up her Gladstone.

“It will be all right,” I say.

She looks up at me. There is everything in her face, that face I thought I knew so well. Defiance and guilt not quite cancelling each other out. And a kind of anger. As she hears a cry there is also fear, as much as I feel myself. The meadows of her soul are cracking open. She moves past me and begins to run, her bag bouncing against her leg. The whites of her petticoat gather at her hem, fragile against the black stockings.

Even the river seems to have curled up on itself, too cowed to ooze the summery perfumes of salt and dead fish swept in on the tide and caught in nets of decaying weed. I strain to hear the waters lap at the wooden piers. But not even that. I’m alone here.

There must always be movement. For the first time I see with utter clarity that there will be no peace. I simply understand it. How it will be, the steps leading to the future time, I don’t know. I will be alone, as I always have been. The world tugs at us and pushes and elbows off course.

The street is empty. Anyone with sense is shivering inside her house, doors bolted. I must walk those few steps and see what is befalling. If I have to pick up stones and throw them at heads I will, or whack someone with a stick. What does it matter now, except that I have to move into it as the others have done?

Katherine is standing motionless just around the corner, barely progressed at all. Perhaps she hears me and I awaken her for she suddenly takes off again, the bag colliding with her knee, and she shouts, “Paddy!”

They are tangled in the middle of the street, six of them, evenly matched. I wince at the sound of fist on bone. It is horrible, raw. I see Paddy Martin now, locked in a crazy dance with Stephen, bunching the tail of Steve’s shirt in his hand as they circle wildly. He kicks at him.

“Lay off!” Stephen yells. “Cool down, you bugger.”

Lev already has one man down on the ground, twists an arm up behind the fellow’s back. He kneels on him, keeping him there.

Yuri is taking a pummelling from his assailant, who is inches taller than he. Katherine bangs her bag against the legs of Yuri’s opponent as she flies past and he looks around, startled as a rabbit. Yuri lunges and barrels into him.

I find I am running towards Lev. He wipes his mouth with his wrist. The fight has gone out of the boy who lies there with his face in the dirt as if he wants nothing more than to close his eyes and sleep. Lev gestures his head towards Katherine questioningly. I say, "It's her brother."

He nods but his real attention is on Yuri. He glances down at the boy.

"I'll sit on him."

Lev springs up and I put my foot on the poor boy's back to show I mean business. Lev's hand grips my shoulder and he's gone.

"You stay put," I say to the boy as I straddle him.

"Yes, ma'am," he says meekly. I settle myself quite ridiculously. I may as well be seated on a log at a cricket match.

Lev pinions the third man from behind, almost lifting him off his feet. As Yuri draws back his fist, Lev shouts something in Russian that seems to halt him. My fellow wriggles under me. "Keep still," I say. The youngster reeks of beer.

"Enough," I hear Lev shout. "Enough." The tall boy's legs are flailing in the air, trying to land a kick on Yuri. The fight has not gone out of him.

Lev shouts something again and reluctantly Yuri walks away. Poor Yuri. The cuts on his face, his lip, his eye have opened again. As he comes towards me, he puts his head down, ashamed in his manly pride. I look away, pretending not to notice.

Katherine is swinging the Gladstone into Paddy and back again into Stephen. "Stop it! Stop it!" she yells, as if she's embroiled in a childhood row with her younger brothers. Miraculously, they seem to listen to her. Paddy lets go of Stephen's ripped shirt and steps away. He leans over, hands propped on his thighs, and struggles for breath.

Katherine, who for some absurd reason is still gripping her bag in one hand, examines Stephen's face with the other. She's all solicitude now, as tender as any lover. If she hopes to retain their secret she's doing a very bad job of it.

"I was comin' to get you," Paddy says to his sister. "Till I ran into that Russian bastard."

I glance casually to ensure that Yuri's feet remain just where they are. I will have to grab him if he makes a run for Paddy.

"And then this fool comes at me."

"I couldn't see who you were," Stephen says.

“It doesn’t matter who I was,” Paddy shouts at him. “I was a mate, wasn’t I, like these other two boys! You know as well as the rest what’s going on.”

My fellow draws his hand up from under his chest to balance under his chin in order to get a better view of the proceedings. I facilitate him by raising my weight and resume my seat a little more lightly than before.

“You’re wrong, Paddy, about the whole lot of it.” Stephen’s voice is low.

“I’m not bloody wrong. You’re wrong. You and your bloody ideas. That bloody Russian captain was full of ...bull.” He glances at his sister, who stands like a referee between them, the bag cradled in her arms while they speak over her dark head. “I told you that at the time. You got ... beguiled, that’s all, Paris and everything. That’s what happened.”

“I got my eyes opened and if you can’t see it, I don’t know what to say to you.” Stephen scratches at his head as if he has a terrible itch. “You of all people, why don’t you see it? You know the score better than I do. You’re the one always talked about the rich.”

“I’m talkin’ about the bloody Russians now.” Paddy stabs his finger towards my darling Lev. “Pack of traitors. They let us down, man, don’t you remember? They get their blasted revolution and they just pack and leave. Well, what about us stuck in the mud for another damn year while they prance off home.”

“We should’ve gone home, too. Why were we there in the first place? That’s the point everyone’s missing.” Stephen seems as unaware of Katherine as Paddy now is, both of them getting hot under the collar again.

“But you didn’t, didja? You didn’t go home. You stuck with us.”

“You don’t understand.” Stephen turns away and I can’t see his face. He tucks his shirt inside his trousers, to calm himself perhaps. Then he says, “It’s not the Russians at fault here. It’s whoever set you up for this tonight.”

“I didn’t get set up by anybody. I just heard it was on, that’s all. Anyway, I’ve had enough of you. Go home, why don’t ya? Your wife is waiting for you. You come with me, Kate. I’ll take you back to your boarding house when things have cooled down.”

Has he guessed? I doubt it, somehow. He reaches for the bag in Katherine’s arms.

But Stephen is as swift. “She can’t go back there tonight. It’s not safe,” he says and both boys tug at the handle.

Katherine simply relinquishes it and walks away from us all. This, more than anything, tells me how she is. She is too young for such unwanted wisdoms. The foundations of the world have rotted away from under her. I can't help, nor can anyone.

"Paddy," Stephen shouts as he tries to pull the bag loose. "Will you let go of the damn thing? You can't both wander around all night, waiting. I'll take her somewhere."

"Ach." Paddy makes that same sound of unlikely alliance between disgust and surrender that his mother often makes. And now he too walks off. "Come on, boys," he says.

Lev has already released his prisoner who stands gingerly touching his jaw, wiggling it back and forth with a degree of absorbed self-consciousness that suggests an afternoon of beer drinking. Lev stands three or four feet behind him, ready to pounce if the boy goes wild again.

Paddy approaches me. He puts out his hand and I reach up for it, although I'm not sure if it's meant for greeting or assistance. He begins to pull me to my feet. Then I realise it's his comrade who concerns him, rather than I.

"Mrs Greene." Apparently he's beyond even questioning my presence here, which is surely unexpected. He rubs the back of his neck. "I came back to Brisbane," he says. "I'm staying at the YMCA across the bridge there." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. He's explaining himself to me like a little boy pre-empting a talking to. He, too, smells of beer. At least he's put on a bit of weight.

The young fellow on the ground seems to be having trouble getting to his feet.

"You're looking a little better, Paddy." I gaze at his eyes, so near mine that I can see them slide away from me.

"I couldn't stay home any longer," he says quietly.

I am overcome with tenderness for this poor, poor boy. I put my hand on his arm, feel the hard, sinewy muscle. "I know," I say. How have I become this person who must be explained to, whom young people believe deserves to hear their sorry excuses? "You're a good boy," I offer.

He nods in acceptance as if I've given him something. "You should get off the streets," he says.

"We will. Don't worry about Katherine. I'll take care of her."

He looks around. Stephen has already joined her and they stand together on the opposite footpath. Paddy whistles at them between his teeth. When Steve looks up, Paddy arrows his left hand towards the river. Go that way, he's saying, it's safer. Just as Lev had said. Steve raises his hand to his forehead in salute.

"Night," Paddy says to me and he takes his mate by the elbow.

"You take care of yourself," I say but he's already walking into the darkness. The three boys head towards the corner. They will probably go back to the mob. Heaven knows how long it will carry on.

A fat drop of moisture spatters on my forehead. How like new-borns we are at times, gazing around, wondrously wondering what this thing is! Another drop wettens the hot skin of my arm. It will be a downpour.

And immediately thunder comes like belly gurglings, low and secretive, rolling up to us from somewhere else, the sea or the vacant West or the overheated green country to the North, perhaps even from the cooler reliefs of the South.

Lev is waiting, unfeeling of the coming rain as he watches the three soldiers.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The stuff burning on the altar is more pungent than the incense in the Catholic church where I hid a few weeks ago, such a short time when I say it. The smell could make one drunk or sick in the head. It frightens me. There's no sun in here, the windows barely of use. Even now at nine in the morning it's still furtive, the corners of the room mysterious, touched by something, light or darkness it's impossible to say which.

The kettle on the fire spouts steam that inside this haphazard house takes on a foreignness, much as the incense does and the nauseating vibrancy of last night's cooking smells. The grandfather joins his hands, bows to the knick-knacks on his tiny shelf, to the falling lines of Chinese marks scratched on wooden tablets, bows and murmurs into the smokiness of the perfumed sticks. It occurs to me that he prays for us more than himself. Though how can I be sure?

The curtain of grey blanket punches elbow shapes into the room. Katherine is determined to go to work today, late or not. She's afraid of getting the sack. I can't imagine such necessity, and I almost think she exaggerates. I know I'm wrong, of course. She emerges from behind her makeshift screen. Her hair's in need of a good brushing though otherwise she'll do. It seems she packed her work clothes in the bag even in the rush of urgent departure. Her wage is for her mother and the boys, that's the thing.

"No mirror," she says to me and she hovers a hair pin over her collapsing bun.

The old Chinaman, hearing her speak, turns to her and smiles and bows. He is all bowing courtesy. He has no teeth, or none that I immediately see.

"Have you got your brush and comb? I'll do it for you," I say and I bow back to him. I don't think he speaks English.

"Yeah, in my bag. Wait till I see," and she disappears behind the curtain.

He talks to me, his mouth moving as if he chews on toffee. Through the sounds he makes, which are as much the impatient mutterings of a cat as any human language, I strain to decipher if he addresses me in English or Mandarin. I have no idea. He waits expectantly and so I bow again, hoping it will suffice.



It was about the tea, I gather. He pours from a pot into bowls which he carries carefully to the table, around which lurk quite an assortment of stools and one outrageously grand carving chair. Perhaps they are like mice here, sleeping inside cupboards and under mats, appearing in one fell swoop only at mealtimes. There could have been any number in the other room when we arrived last night. I can barely tell one from the other. The bowls raise clouds above themselves and these, too, are odorous in a terrifying and fragrant way. He holds his hands out in offering and it seems we are to sit and partake.

“Thank you,” I say and draw out a stool but he torrents some cacophony and rushes over to the regal chair, slaps it lightly along its rounded rim. “Excuse me,” I say hastily and I bang my hip on one of its arms in my haste to oblige. He’s smaller than I am, wispy white hair still loose about his shoulders. He’s of an age when he is as much woman as man. What is he doing here, so far from home, from daughters to care for him? I can’t understand why they took us in. Just as well they did. At least we’ve been safe overnight.

“Thank you,” I say again and, lost in the seat, sniff at the concoction. “Mmm,” I enthuse and he claps his hands.

“Come and sit down and have your tea,” I say as Katherine re-emerges, the wooden-backed brush in one hand, a wide-toothed comb in the other.

“I’ll be late.”

“You’re already late, sit down. You need something inside you.”

As we hold the hot bowls carefully between our fingers, blow on them before we dare sip, we are more at ease with each other than at any other time in all the years I’ve known her and watched her grow. No longer Mrs Greene and little Martin girl. If we are anything else apart from simply ourselves, we are two women with no more secrets, no need for judgment. She has more reason than I to fall victim to undeniable love. She’s loved Stephen all her life, I know that.

The tea smells of flowers and tastes of smoke. It is good, this morning. I lay the bowl down and reach for the brush resting in her lap. I stand up and walk behind her, pluck out the hairpins and hold the warm, heavy mass in my hand. I slowly run the bristles along its length. Her head arches gradually backwards and I hear her sigh.

The earth melts under my feet, drenched from a night of rain. My shoes are not meant for this mud oozing over the leather, and my heels sink and suck. The downpour has brought a shimmering green to all the vegetation, the trees along the road, the cabbage leaves, and has released a sweetness from the soil that floats over it like a river mist. The beds and rills cover every available piece of land right up to the fenced boundaries on all sides of the house. One more drill of cucumbers, just another tripod of runner beans, they must have said. These people alarm me, their robes, long plaits down their backs, eyes that never meet one's own. I've liked them better when they dress in shirt and trousers, call "Good morning, missus," as they trundle by in the sunshine or when I casually notice them laughing at rather bad jokes a housemaid might tell at her gate before they tip a straw hat to her, pocket their coppers and shillings and climb back on board the vegetable cart. But here, I feel like the stranger. Up near the road, two of them stand leaning on their hoes, aware of me. The morning is very quiet. I am not sure if a cry would get lost in the clarity of light or travel a great distance.

Stephen has taken Katherine away, both of them seated beside the driver on the market dray. It will be slow going, with the crates bumping and rattling on the back, the precious, freshly-picked cargo to be considered above all else. They're no longer in sight. I stare down the road after them, my hand a shield over my eyes.

He would not look at me as I addressed him. It is rich of me to murmur harsh words. Something in the sudden strengthening of his chest told me he considered it so. As we stood out here together, waiting for her, and the silence between us became overwhelming, I had said quietly, "What are you doing, Stephen?"

He gazed across the field of horses stretching up the rise of the land.

"Didn't you love Mary, when you married her?" And as I spoke the words I felt that a stone had been tossed into my own well.

He took a long while to answer. I considered walking back into the Chinaman's house. Then he said, "I thought I did. If I hadn't already enlisted, I wouldn't have married her. That's the truth."

"Bit late now," I said, cruelly.

He shook it off and continued, in a sort of dream, "She used to write to me, Katie. I loved her letters. It got so I barely remembered ... my wife. And I'd live for Kate's letters." He almost met my eyes then, but only for a moment. "They weren't

about anything. Just ordinary things. But I missed her, hearing her voice. Then when I got back and I saw her.” He was silent for a moment. I was silenced too.

“We only had two days. That’s all we’ve ever had. At Christmas. Except for last night.”

“You’ll destroy her,” I said.

“And her family,” he said himself. “Yes, I know.”

I had no right. He’s in his own pain, just as I have been for twenty years. I don’t know what he endured over there either. They say now it was worse than we were told. A man keeps his heart pains to himself, bellows and whitens if he has a sniffing cold and yet hides his tormented spirit. I know one thing, though, that I didn’t know before. He loves Katherine. No, two things. He loves her and he can’t have her.

I’m feeling awkward now, waiting for Lev to return. Even the old man was glad to get out of the house, away from our mutual embarrassment, and busy himself with various clay pots at the stream, clinking in the distance like cow bells.

The eaves still drip from a shower that came and went within minutes and I sit here in the shade on a wooden bench. I had to take my shoes and stockings off. It’s too steaming hot. I watch fresh drops glisten and slide along my feet.

Perhaps I should’ve gone back into town earlier with Katherine instead of hanging around here like a fool.

I see his shadow before I even hear him. As I look up, the expression on his faces changes. He smiles quickly, his mouth, his eyes but I’ve already caught a glimpse of what was there before.

“What is it?” I say.

“Nothing. You’re getting wet.”

“Just my legs. It’s awful inside.”

He sits beside me, my hip touching his.

“Would you like some water?” I say.

“Later. We’ll have to get you home.”

My thumb rubs at a fingernail and the colour darkens for a moment. I lay my head back against the wooden wall. The whole house stinks from steam and a patient rot, the lush smell of decaying forests.

“Very well,” I say.

He doesn't speak. His profile is black in the deeply shaded light, his jaw and cheeks in need of a shave.

"Any news?" I say.

"Bad. They're asking the police to protect the synagogue tonight."

"How on earth do they make out the synagogue is involved?" How absurd. A house of worship is hardly the place to find a hot-bed of atheists, I should have thought.

"To them, a Russian is a Russian."

"Ridiculous."

He doesn't turn his face towards me. But he has something to say to me, I think. I sit and wait. The bony hinge of his jaw moves and still he remains mute. Then he says, "There will be arrests, Isabel."

"So there should be."

"No." He slides down on the bench and faces me, picks up my hand from my lap. "No. They will arrest us."

"But you didn't do anything!" He holds my hand between both of his.

"It had to come."

It's written in his eyes but even so I can hardly believe it. "You've known all along," I say.

He kisses the inside of my wrist as if that will suffice.

"Haven't you been through enough?" I say. "What did you survive for, Lev? Listen to me. It's enough, what you've done. Losing your country and your studies, and getting beaten up when they arrested you over here. And how you got across Siberia, no, I know all about it. Yuri told me. For goodness sake, leave it. You have a new life now."

Before I even finish, he's holding me, kissing my ear, my hair, and I know I've lost.

He says quietly, "It is my life."

## Chapter Thirty

The car door shuts and their voices are caught up in the bright morning air, tinkling like crystal. The apprehension I feel reminds me of the excitement of a child, alone and waiting for someone to come, the lift of the heart as something shifts, as sound breaks the silence. Unless it's dread. I stand up from the sofa.

The gate squeals delightedly open, their steps crunch on the path as if sand has blown in from the sea and deposited itself there. And now there is a heavier tread up the tiled steps. I hear Madeleine laugh.

The voices are closer, more subdued as they come inside. My hands meet over my stomach.

"Anyone home?" she calls.

I clear my throat and say, "In here, Madeleine."

I hear her walking down the hall. She appears in the doorway, smiling at me. My hands drop and I can't help but smile back. Quickly her gaze runs over my dressing gown, the gape at the neck, the slippers which stick out from under the sofa.

"Captain Simpson is here," she says as if warning me.

But he's already beside her. "Good morning, Mrs Greene," he says and he smiles. They seem to be smiling a great deal.

I struggle for some words. "Did you have a good time?" I ask.

"Very," she says and gazes up at him.

The arms of my Japanese gown are monk-wide. I slip my hands inside them and hold my elbows. "Shall I ask Cook to make tea?" I am sure Cook is aware enough of Madeleine's return and is panting to get her mistress alone in order to impart the news. She's probably standing at the bottom of the basement steps, her arms folded too.

"Thank you, Mrs Greene, no. I have an appointment in town," the Captain replies.

"I'll just see him out," she says and she places her arm through his, rather warmly.

“Good day, Captain,” I say.

He doesn't have a chance to bid me farewell before he's rushed down the corridor but I hear him sing out, “Good day, Mrs Greene”. Quite extraordinary. They're like youngsters.

I sit down again, tuck my feet up under me. A bedroom door closes. That must be Susan, dealing with the luggage. I should broach the issue first, before Cook reports my disappearance for a couple of days. I could always lie. I met someone from home, stayed in town with them for a few days, what a lark! A white lie brings no harm if told in good intention. Isn't it better to make light of it, after all? What possible advantage would come from confession?

The Captain's distinctive walk on the footpath distracts me, the drag on one side, the tap of his stick. I forgot all about it while he was in front of me. How odd. She will wave from the verandah. And then she'll return to me and I will begin.

“Izzy.”

I look up as she advances, her hair loosened about her face, blown by the wind as they drove, I expect. It's pretty like that. She does seem younger. She joins her hands and, to my amazement, kneels in front of me.

“Izzy,” she says again.

“What?” I say. Her eyes are soft, on the point of tears, yet she does not seem in the least distressed.

She drops her head to my lap. I can't credit it. But neither can I resist touching the tangled curls at her nape, soothing her with long strokes. I feel her breath through the silk of my gown. “Madeleine, what is it?”

She turns her face to the side, her cheek still pressed against my thigh. “I'm going to marry him,” she says and she hides herself behind her hand.

The breeze blows through me. I am almost not here. I'd thought the ground solid, unyielding even. But it isn't. It shifts and sinks and so does everything on it. I walk under the trees and my blouse billows. Flower-heads and leaves drop in front of me.

Lev has left me for a week without news. Stay away, he said to me. Just until we see what happens. I wait every day for a message, lie in bed at night listening to the clock ticking, the floor-boards sighing.

Madeleine and I change places now. All these years, she has wanted what I had and I didn't know it. Perhaps she will have more luck than I. I hope she does. I can't stay with her, no matter what she says, couldn't bear it. But where will I go?

The street has not yet recovered. Paling fences look like mouths with front teeth knocked out of them. I can't make out the roof of the hall from here. Does it still stand? And Lucy and Pyotr, have they returned to their apartment? Suddenly I need to know everything. Yuri's injured face, has it mended? And Marina, where is she? It's not fair that he keeps me ignorant. I worry, doesn't he realise that? And anyway I'm already implicated in all this. What befalls him, befalls me. Doesn't he realise?

The gate is lop-sided, propped open in the dirt. A hinge has come adrift. The front door is also open. I wipe my feet on the mat. The leaves do not want to come loose from me. The boarding house is silent.

The white painted doors running down both sides of the hall are shut. When I reach it, I rest my forehead against the last one and listen. I seem to hear only myself, my breath, the beat of my pulse. I tap gently with my knuckle.

I turn the brass handle and push. What I see sweeps away all my hopes as if they were bits of coloured paper. The beds are rudely stripped, sheets and bedspreads dumped across the rugs like shipwrecks on a beach. I know what has happened here and what it means. Books are torn, thrown down against their spines. The wardrobe door is hanging off, barely clinging by two loose screws. Lev's good shirt is pinned under its collapsed edge.

The landlady is not in her kitchen. Perhaps she's putting her feet up at this hour of the afternoon. She must be shocked too. The garden is empty, the mango trees still heavy with the last of their fruit, and a lone bird stalks the coarse grass, its long, hooked beak stabbing at the air. I pray it doesn't spread its wings and rush at me. I walk quietly, pushed up against the back verandah wall, trying not to attract its ire. And I pray Katherine has her half-day off today.

Her door, also, is closed. I raise my hand to knock just before I hear the voices. I know even as my fingers graze the wood, but it's too late. Norah Martin is in there and this conversation is not meant for an audience. Should I wait?

I have tip-toed almost to the kitchen door when I hear Katherine's voice say, "Mrs Greene."

I turn my head. "Am I interrupting?"

She doesn't answer that, of course. Nevertheless we are both constrained to play this out. I walk back. I see Norah inside, sitting on the bed. She looks out at me and I feel as if she's struck me. Katherine, breathless, stands close to me. I step into the room and she shuts the door. The curtains are closed.

"How long have you known about this?" Norah says.

I gaze at the kitchen chair Katherine has apparently requisitioned. I don't respond well to accusation. My temper flares for a moment, till good sense prevails. Norah, after all, is in an unholy position.

She seems to have calmed. She fiddles with her handbag, snaps open the catch and pulls out a linen handkerchief which is finely crocheted at the corners. I watch her as she taps it along her upper lip. Katherine gestures for me to take the seat and I sit down with my back very straight. Kate remains standing.

I can't imagine what to say. I expect she's heard of my *affaire*. Heaven knows what she thinks of me.

Since no one else speaks, I ask, "Have you just arrived?"

"I spent almost a week in that damn camp they've put up. He gave me a few days' holidays from the hotel. Doubt if the job will be there by the time I get back."

Katherine grips her arms over her stomach as if she has an ache. Poor child.

"So you all went out to the Chinaman's place, did'ja?" Norah continues.

I glance at her daughter. She's been crying. She can't look at me. "Yes," I say. "It was the safest place. It seems they've had a few brutal incidents themselves, the Chinese, so they happily took us in."

I hope I have made a point. Norah stops her fidgeting. I add, "Katherine and I slept on a palliasse in the kitchen. Quite comfortable."

Norah looks over at the girl.

"Right," she says.

"She couldn't have stayed the night here, Mrs Martin. You wouldn't credit how bad it was. Even Paddy was on his way 'round the back to pull her out."

"He wrote and told me," she says and I now understand. Paddy saw everything, realised everything. And Norah must have caught the first train North.

"It's the rest of it," she says.

"Yes."

"She'll have to go away."



What that has cost Norah Martin perhaps only I know. I can hear her breath from across the room.

Katherine, head down, nods.

Norah stands, her arms held out. She takes the girl's shoulders, pulls her close. "What's done is done," she says. "He's a husband and a father now, and that's that."

Katherine's face rests against her mother's shoulder, her arms limp by her side. Her eyes are closed as if she's quite exhausted. Tears snail down the side of her nose.

"I should go," I say and I rise. Neither of them beg to differ.

But they break apart, nevertheless. I touch Norah's arm and murmur, "I'll see you soon, I hope," and I kiss her soft cheek. She's distracted, barely aware of me.

"Goodbye, Katherine," I say. The light of afternoon spills into the room as I walk outside. My own concerns have no business here. I will just have to wait it out, hope for a message from somebody. I feel terribly lonely. The floorboards seem to sag under me.

The sound of her footsteps make me gladly halt. She grabs my elbow. "Mrs Greene!" She swallows, trying to get her breath. She leans in close to me and says, "Lev was arrested. He came back a couple of nights ago to get some things. Somebody must've been watching the house, because the police came."

She looks at my eyes. "I'm sorry," she says. "Are you all right?"

I struggle to speak. "Oh, yes, dear," I manage to say and I pat her hand. Perhaps she watches me as I hurry through to the dining room. I don't know where I should go next, or what I should do. I seem to be heading towards the river and home.

I wish they'd leave me alone. At least in my own house I could lie in bed, listen to Christopher closing the front door, treading down the path, and plump my pillow with my fist and stay there all day if I wanted.

She's tapping again.

"Isabel! Are you awake?" I hear the door creak. I presume she's peeping in.

The room is still darkened, the curtains motionless even though I remember sliding the window open last night. I roll over slowly, the sheet tangled between my legs. "Come in, Maddie."

She's a ghost, swimming across the room toward me. The mattress weighs as she sits down. I move my hip.

“Are you sick?” she says and she gently places the back of her hand against my forehead. Her loose hair falls across my shoulders. “No,” she answers herself. “You’re cool.”

“I just felt like a lie-in.” I hope she gets my meaning.

“You haven’t been yourself for a few days.”

Is that a statement or a question? I move further away from her and struggle to a half-sitting position, and I make a grab for the pillow which she has happily stolen to support her knee. She watches it depart from under her and I thump it as I tuck it behind me. I say, “Do you want me to go somewhere with you?”

“No,” she exclaims. As if to impute an impure motive to her is the most hurtful kind of calumny! Her hand dives into the pocket of her gown and she pulls out the folded sheets of a letter. “It’s this. I received it this morning.” Her eyes are oddly sharp in the poor, porous light. I draw my feet up.

“It’s from Christopher,” she says.

I hesitate. “My Christopher?”

“I don’t know any other Christopher, do I?” She’s cross now, too. This is what happens when I give way to violent moods.

She smooths the letter out on her thighs, stroking it like a baby she’s not quite sure she loves. I am put out. Chris has no right engaging Madeleine in his business. What do they think I am, an imbecile to be therapeutically treated between them?

“I see. How very strange.”

“Well, what else is he supposed to do?”

Madeleine, the hero of my husband, defender of my marriage which she denigrates depending on the weather. She snaps her fingernail at a page. “The main thing is ...” She takes a breath as if preparing for an announcement of some delicate importance. “He wants you back.”

I fold my arms. “Does he? That’s very good of him.”

“Oh, Isabel, you can be so cruel sometimes.”

I probably am. She’s no doubt quite right about that, though I seem to be unaware of my propensity for it when the crucial moments arrive. I must hold very firm to myself now or I will shatter. Madeleine doesn’t know that about me, nor does Christopher, for all the long years. And who is he, this man who writes to Madeleine for the first time since they met? I don’t know him either. I should feel pity, and all I feel is a quiet rage. How much has he told her?

“Madeleine,” I say. “Let me inform you that if I return to Christopher, we shall continue as we’ve been in the past, profoundly unhappy. I shall go quite mad and he’ll increasingly ... freeze himself into a block of ice. Why on earth does he want that?”

“Because he loves you. I didn’t realise that before, Iz. But just read his letter.”

“No! Because he lacks imagination. Or fears it. He might even be happy one day, if I’m not there. We made each other ill, Madeleine. We are both at fault and both without fault.”

She looks down at the letter, uncertain. I’ve always been the stronger of the two of us, that’s the real picture, ever since we were tiny girls. When I want, I can demolish her, any argument, any stance. It’s unfair, how well I can do that. That’s where I am cruel, saving up such potency for the critical event. Her shoulders begin to hunch and she’s a child again. I reach out and briefly touch the hand spread on his perfect script.

“Madeleine, I know you feel sympathy for him when you read how he expresses himself, and you feel it for me too and I thank you very, very much. But I honestly can’t see how I can go on that way. I just can’t.”

“Perhaps if you talked to him. He’s so dreadfully upset.”

Somehow I suspect he hasn’t mentioned my disclosure in the last letter, that I had feelings for someone else. Maybe he didn’t believe it or maybe I was more opaque than I meant to be. I should’ve told Madeleine from the start. How she doesn’t guess, how she didn’t see through my white lie when I went missing for a couple of days, I just don’t understand. Am I so good a fraudster? If I say it now it will look petty, a girl’s nonsense. So that is what this is all about, she’d say! And you letting on it’s poor Christopher who bears the blame.

She folds the sheets. “Well.”

What she may have said next is lost. Susan has materialised at my open door. “Ma’am,” she says. “A woman to see Mrs Greene.”

“Who is it?” Madeleine asks.

“I don’t know, ma’am. Some foreign woman. I couldn’t understand her.”

I’ve already climbed on all fours, most ungraciously, to the bottom of the bed. My gown is on the floor. As I hurry past Susan, pushing my arms into it, I hear my cousin say, “Where is she?”

“Out on the verandah. I didn’t know whether to let her inside or what.”

I bunch my hair and lift it over the collar. I'm aware of the two of them trailing me down the hallway. The light outside is very strong. I close the front door behind me.

Marina stands from the bamboo couch as I approach. I've forgotten to put on slippers. A dead-head of gardenia, dropped since the early morning sweeping and already stained brown with uncanny decay, oozes under my foot.

## Chapter Thirty-One

*T*he light has drained out of Brisbane and I have no desire to be there any longer. I'm glad it's behind me. I am drawn down the railway track southwards like a bee to a flower, the tide to the shore. I know how I am, half-mad, querulous with determination. I am going to him and I will find him. It simply cannot be, that he will be dragged away from me like this. I won't allow it.

As our train arrives into the border station, the hiss of brakes and the scream of axles bite into my head. I can tolerate nothing. Let them think me rude, pushing past them in the aisle. I am rude. I just need to get down on to the platform, find someone to ask.

I hate it up here on the flat, featureless plain. The wind sucks sound out of the air. What a dreadful waste it was, that week I spent quarantined here in the camp months ago. A week I could have spent with Lev. I should have ridden across at night, like the boys do.

The sudden slide of the baggage compartment's door thunders as I pass and I stumble into a well-dressed gentleman who stares down at me, startled. I have no capacity to apologise. Up ahead, I see the station-master, a small, officious-looking man whose bushy side-burns are ginger-bright, a boy dressed up, a flag tucked under his arm, watch-chain strung importantly across his vest. I will make him tell me. I'll have to pounce before he reaches the conductor who's helping an old woman down from her carriage. She's as frail as a hollow stick, travelling on her own. The station-master is watching her too.

"Excuse me," I sing out.

His eyes gaze around till they land on me. I say again, "Excuse me," as I hurry to him. "Perhaps you can help me."

“Yes, ma’am,” he says. His skin is reddened from the cold wind and a drop of moisture hangs from his nose. He sniffs too vehemently.

I can’t stand that drop dangling above his moustache. My nerves are too raw for that nagging imminence. I look at his ear.

“The Russian prisoners who arrived here three days ago. Where are they now, do you know?”

He’d leaned towards me all politeness a moment ago and now he withdraws and the smile fades. He straightens and says, “Can’t help you, madam. That is not my department.”

“Surely you know where they are staying while they wait. They haven’t crossed the border yet, I take it?”

“Not as far as I know. The New South Wales authorities are coming up for them. I haven’t been informed when they’ll be taken over the border. That’s all a police matter.”

He begins to walk towards the conductor. I keep up with him. “Whom should I ask?” I say, and he stops.

“You could try the police station.”

“The police station.” I look over at the cluster of buildings that constitute the township.

He takes the white flag from under his arm, still furled tight, and points. “No. Up there. They should know something.” Cheekily, he allows his gaze to linger on my face as if he can’t quite believe the foolishness of some. He shakes his head and when he wanders off this time I let him go.

The up-turned collar of my coat protects my mouth from the wind but my eyes sting. The flap of the heavy, woollen hem chafes at my calves. I walk head down, straight into it.

A voice calls but I don’t recognise it. Then a hand touches my arm and I look up, startled.

“Isabel,” Yuri Abramovich is saying. “Come inside hotel.”

I am suddenly so happy, so happy to see him here. I allow him to guide me, one hand on my back, the other relieving me of my travelling case. We step up on to the footpath which thuds dully under our tread. He ushers me in through a side door and, as he closes it behind us, the noise dies.

“Isabel,” he says again and he looks at me. “You are here.”

“Marina came to see me yesterday. She told me what had happened.”

“They will be taken down to jail in Sydney where they wait for decision. It is not much can be done.” He, too, is wrapped in a winter coat, his hat low over his dark curls.

“But they’re still here, aren’t they?”

“Yes, yes, maybe till tomorrow. Police coming up on train.”

“Can I see him, Yuri?”

His eyebrows are as dark as his hair and curved like a new moon. His pale skin has flushed with the cold, his nose, his cheeks. Behind him, I see that a staircase quietly ascends to the upper floor. The reception desk is empty. There doesn’t seem to be anybody about.

The words I’ve just spoken have cut down a forest of trees, have put Lev and me and everything between us in clear, clean light. Can I see him? I hear Yuri’s breath and I wait.

At last he says, “You must get room here. That is best. Then we discuss.”

I do not dare to argue. There is something frightening in how he speaks. Perhaps the current is too strong after all, carrying us all where we don’t want to go. I can’t bear to think about it.

A man has silently appeared behind the desk. Yuri and I walk across the entrance hall as he eases his spectacle wires over his ears. It’s so quiet now I can hear the squeak of my shoes.

He sits on the bed beside me. In other circumstances, that would never happen. He picks up my hand and holds it in the heat of his two palms. I am crying. This is the second time in my life I've cried in front of another person. I can't stop myself. I sob. My face is wet, the tears dripping off my chin. Everything I feel for Lev is spilling out and my body shakes from it.

He will be gone from me. Yuri won't lie to me and I thank him for that. If Lucy has already lost her husband, and if the babe at her breast was not enough to soften hearts, what hope is there for me?

I try to wipe my face against the shoulder of my blouse. I haven't any dignity left anyway. What good is dignity to me now or ever again? "What is going to happen to Lucy?" I say, my throat sore.

"You know the way of Lucy. She goes every day to demand news, if he has been disembarked off ship yet, where he is. She wants to join him. Comrades in Sydney look after her and baby but nobody knows what to do."

"Poor girl." I slide my hand from his. I've come back to myself, drained, landed in a bruised peace after a most terrible storm.

Yuri inches away from me on the mattress. His shoes are badly scuffed, white at the toes. "One never knows what is in future for us all," he says.

"No. But I may expect the worst." The wash basin on the bureau has a crack right down the side through a garden of blue, lacy flowers. "It's what they want, anyway, isn't it? They want to go home to Russia."

He doesn't answer me. We sit in uncomfortable silence.

Then he stands up and the springs squeal. I feel the mattress rise. I'm tired now but I don't want to stay alone in this strange room. Yuri walks to the door.

"We must eat," he says.

He's very pale. How lonely he must be, too. For some reason, still free. He's been sacked from his job in Brisbane. No one wants Russians, after the trouble. He might be better off if they'd arrested him. He probably wishes they had.

"I'll come downstairs in a few minutes," I say. "Just let me wash my face."



He reaches for the door handle and then turns to me. "Isabel," he says. "Lev Andreyavich does not want to leave you."

I am staring at the shadow on his jaw, badly in need of a shave. I can't speak. When he closes the door behind him, I am still staring, gazing now at the brass coat-peg. The torrent rises in me again and I close my eyes. I clasp my hands together, hold them up against my mouth. Please, please God, let me see him. Let him stay.

I lay awake much of the night, thinking of him. We breathed the same high air, felt the same cold breeze as it made branches creak, rattled windows. And when dawn came, we both heard the first kookaburras laughing through the bush. The morning light touched our eyelids at the same moment.

Now I sit on this stiff, red couch in the foyer trying not to notice the proprietor as he makes a point of manning his desk for as long as I remain here. I ignore the cook as she peeps out from the dining room. I feel the tremble of a death watch. I am too deeply in dread to panic. If only I could touch him. My back and shoulders are beginning to ache and yet I don't want to move. The proprietor clears his throat. I'd bet he regrets his decision to wait it out with me, to keep an officious eye on the Red-lover. I can smell the roast lamb from here and so can he. His stomach must be gurgling.

The door handle turns and we both stare at it. It is Yuri. He looks at me and then at the man, and closes the door quickly behind him. My heart beats like a heavy bell at each step he takes across the wooden floor. He sits beside me, his head so close I can smell his breath.

"They are on way to station. We must go."

His eyes are bleared, red-rimmed. Another one who didn't sleep last night. As he stands, he cups my elbow with his hand and I am forced to stand too. He takes up my bag, swinging it lightly. He is wiry, Yuri, stronger than he seems.

"Good morning, sir," he says to the proprietor, far more politely than is warranted.

I don't even look at the man. I hope I have never been like that, so sure of my moral safety, so mighty in my judging. And if I have, I don't think I'll be able to do it to any poor creature again. He tried to put shame on me. What does he know of it?

"Close the door after you," he shouts as we step outside.

The wind has died down today. We're only twenty miles away from my home across the border but it is not pretty here in this town as it is there. I don't like this place. The earth is hard from the cold. Yuri hurries me along and I'm almost trotting.

"What happens now?" I say, breathless.

"The Queensland guards must hand prisoners over to police from New South Wales. The train already arrived up from Sydney. Waits in station."

"Will we get there in time?"

He pulls me along more sharply and we both break into a run.

"Hurry," I hear him say.

They are lined up on the platform, several Queensland policemen flanking them. Yuri pulls me to a halt.

"This way," he says quietly and he leads me down the other side of the station building. No one else is here. The train from Brisbane has already reversed, gone back up the track. Its passengers have walked across to the Sydney train and sit in their carriages, waiting. Another gust of breeze teases at the dust and the ragged geraniums in their careless garden beds. Yuri's breath sounds through his nostrils. He is alert and nervous. Perhaps he doesn't realise that his fingers pinch the skin of my arm.

"Through here," he whispers and we enter the high-ceilinged waiting room. Our footsteps echo. The benches are empty, the embers in the hearth spit and glow like stars as the fire dies. The other door is closed. I look at it, longingly.

He hesitates, finding words, before he says, "Take care, Isabel, you understand? You must not appear that you know them, or police will stop you."

I nod. I am terribly nervous and terribly eager. He looks at me and I try to seem calm. Then he opens the door and there is Lev. He is standing right there, staring straight ahead.

Doesn't he hear us, so close beside him in the doorway?

He turns his head and his eyes widen. He gazes at me. I cannot move. There is nothing else. No Yuri, no guards, no cold, no shivering trees. Just this one gaze.

My hand rises. I must touch him. His eyes are breaking my heart. Yuri grips my wrist. Lev suddenly looks away.

A voice is saying, "Get them moving." Yuri's grip tightens.

Lev glances quickly back to me. He begins to move as the group of Bolsheviks is herded towards the train. I step outside under the awning.

There seems to be some kind of argument. One of the New South Wales policemen is waving his arms from the carriage step and I hear him shout, "Step back, constable. We've no intention of breaking the quarantine. Step back and we'll haul 'em onboard."

It is all quite mad. The Queenslanders have pulled back behind their prisoners in a parody of infection control. But I am glad of the diversion. Lev watches me as I walk down the platform towards him.

The officer on the train leans forward, grips his shoulder and pulls him in. He seems to stumble. I reach out my hand. But he is gone.

"What will we do?"

"Nothing. Nothing, Isabel. We must go back to Brisbane."

"No! Who will take care of them?"

"The comrades in Sydney will keep us informed. I will send telegram, say they are on the way down."

"I can't go back to Brisbane." The smoke from the train's funnel belches black and I hear the whisper of steam. The train is set to leave.

"Come with me, what else can you do?"

“I can’t. My cousin is getting married. It’s different for her now. And I don’t want to. There’s nothing for me there, Yuri. I can’t go back.”

The escaping steam is so loud that we can barely hear each other.

“Have you money?” he says.

“No, not much. I’ll go home and get some.”

The axles grind backwards. He seems so anxious. But I know what I have to do. “Give me my bag, Yuri. I’ll be all right.”

“Stay at home, then, Isabel. Don’t go down to Sydney. You will be lost.”

I ease it from his hand. I am already lost.

“Dear Yuri,” I say and I kiss his cheek. The soft whiskers tickle my nose.

I walk down the corridor, my hand against the wall to gain balance as the train pulls out. Suddenly a compartment door slides open. It is Katherine. She beckons me.

I rush to her and she touches my shoulder briefly as I go in. She is alone. She closes the door as I almost fall into the seat and she sits down across from me.

“I saw you on the platform,” she says.

I am cradling the bag on my lap, can’t seem to let it go. I lay my head on it. I am completely undone and I no longer care who sees it.

I feel her arm around my back. I shake my head. There is nothing I can say. But somehow the kindness of the child begins to soothe me. I sit up slowly and slowly she withdraws her arm, shifts back to her own seat.

“Is he being deported?”

“Probably,” I say.

She settles against the leather, gazes out the window as the train approaches the border. She, too, is quite pale. She doesn’t speak again and I feel more appreciative of that than anything else she could have offered.

A woman is walking a dog up the rise of a shallow hill. She seems so at peace. My handkerchief smells of the perfume Madeleine sprayed on it before I left her

yesterday. I'm glad now of its fragrance and I breathe it in. I wipe under my eyes.

Then I say, "You're going home."

The wrought-iron rack over her head is laden with her things, a suitcase, the Gladstone bag, a rug.

"No," she says. She is still staring out the window. "I'm going down to Sydney. I'm staying with my cousins till I get a job."

I fold the handkerchief over and keep it in my hand for company.

The train slows as it arrives into my own station. It is unbearable.

Katherine stands and looks down at me. I tug at the brim of my hat but I do not move. "You getting off?" she says and she picks up my bag.

"I'll take it."

But she slides open the door and goes out into the corridor.

"Mum's meeting the train for a few minutes," she says behind her and she's gone.

I reach the carriage door just as the brakes are applied and we both stumble against the wall. I see Norah Martin through the window.

She sits on a painted bench, her black hat on her head, the broken feather plucked out of it, her handbag neatly gripped against her waist. Swirls of steam part as she rises up and comes towards us.

"Mrs Martin," I say.

She hardly grants me the slightest acknowledgement. She is overcome, I realise that. Katherine is in her arms and there's no place for me.

I walk away, down to the front of the train. My neck cranes as I stare, hoping. Does he sense that I'm here? The driver and Mr Stoppard are lighting up pipes at the engine steps. The station-master salutes me and I nod.

The windows of the prisoners' carriage are high, too small. I can see nothing. I wait and stare.

By the time I notice the driver is heaving himself back on board, Mr Stoppard is no longer there. The whistle blows and the axles wind. It's all too fast.

There's so much pain in my heart, I feel I might faint. The wheels jolt forward and I too begin to move, keeping pace with the prisoners' silent carriage until it pulls away from me, and then other carriages begin to flash by. We are left behind, our bush town, lost in the storm of smoke, the vast reaches of the country all around us to the south and the north, the east and the west, and beyond that the oceans that cosset us and keep us separate.

And now I must turn away from the snake of faded smoke and answer Mr Stoppard, who has come up behind me. "Yes," I say. "If Mr Kelly's there, I'll get a lift from him."

I follow the trolley load of baggage through the deserted hall. The rolling wheels disturb the lonely quiet. As I come out into the light again, I see Mr Stoppard and Mr Kelly talking in the sun beside the cab.

I hear her footsteps behind me. "Can I offer you a ride, Mrs Martin?" I say.

She's been crying, red-faced, swollen, a dreadful spectacle in one so toughened. "I'd rather walk," she says and she passes me without another word.

She blames me. How could she do that? As if I have leaked strangers' ideas all over Katherine, sat by and watched her ruin her life. I want some reassurance from someone. Doesn't she know that my heart is breaking too?

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The tide is swollen, rocking the boat, sucking at its sides, staining it dark with wet, the light draining away the contours of its continents, drying their passing shapes back to where they began. And another swell, full-bellied, washes up from the unknowable floor of the sea, rocks the boat again.

The girl is carried over the wooden struts of the gangway, her head dangling, dark hair loose as seaweeds. She holds the infant against her breast, hugging him so tight that her own chest is crushed. Someone cries. Beneath her on the slippery, salt-washed pier, a woman tries to break free of a man's big arms and she sobs, "Come back, come back."

The girl grabs at a pole as they reach the deck, her hand clinging so tenaciously that her arm is nearly wrenched from its socket. They ease her fingers off, one by one. There is nothing she can do. And the infant tears at his mother's breast till heat sharpens into a bladed pain.

The sea rises and sways the rounded bows, the steaming chimney tilts as if it will prise loose and crash down through the inner chambers, and the sailors' legs harden into rocks. And still he locks her in his tough embrace, won't let her go, won't let her throw her baby over the side to safety, to her own mother's aching arms.

They toss her somewhere, somewhere so hard her skin hurts, slam the door. And now it's black as night. She senses the child tugging at her nipple, but it feels so far away, the throbbing pull of it, and they are rocked again, rolled over to the clammy coldness of the wall.

The ceiling circles like a hawk, the sun glinting with awful inevitability around the edges of its blackened wings. My hand comes to my forehead. I don't know who put it there.

A murmur stands over me, whispering in my ear. I am submerged, the water films just over my face, becomes my veil. I lick against it. It rolls me over.

There's a shadow nearby, very close. It is weighty, has a limb that moves towards me. I close my eyes again. A damp cloth wipes slowly across my brow.

It must be Lev. A face is right above me but I see it through the seashells of my eyelids. They are too heavy to lift.

I cough. It is like a bolt of hot iron. I bury my mouth in the pillow.

There are voices. I can hear them from very far away, voices black with knowing. I'm too tired to know. Let me go, then. Just let me go.

"We thought we were going to lose you."

I see her sitting on a chair. Her black hat is on her head. Why has she put the broken feather back into the band? How comical she is, her handbag prim on her lap, and the white gauze of her mask stretched right across her nose, her cheeks, looped about her ears so that they stick out like freshly opened oysters.

I try to speak. I'm raw inside. It is better just to lie, to look. For a few moments before I saw her, I wasn't sure where I was, the Chinaman's house perhaps, the sun peeping through a crack in the roof, the fusty smell of straw, or Madeleine's, the comforting breadth of the bed and the faint shape of someone moving beyond the curtain, the rhythmic brush of the verandah broom. Then I remembered. Back here again, the slight churn of dread in the stomach, the vacant days ticking off till the end of time. But this is not my room. I gaze around. My head almost lifts from the pillow, astonished. There are other cots, apart from mine. The curtains on two large windows are opened and a warming light glitters through the paned glass.

"Ssh," she says. "You're in the hospital. You've been very sick. Here, have a drink."

She's huge and black as she leans over me and the drinking glass also glitters sun. Her strong hand holds my head, the fingers hot against my scalp. The water is too cold but it seems to restore me. A dribble irritates my skin. My arm barely obeys me, as if I'm still locked in sleep, yet my hand wipes clumsily at the drip. She lays me back down.

"Was he here?" My voice surprises me.

The feather pecks at the air as she seats herself. "Oh, yes," she says. "He was here last night, I believe, for a good while."

I have turned my head to the side. The pillow is soft, caressing. The iron rails of a bedstead under the window intrigue me and my eyes play with the poles, lined up



like toy soldiers, white as sheets. She can't possibly know whom I mean. Unless it's true.

"Who?" I say. I drag my gaze from the intrigue of the straight lines.

She looks at me, waits. "Who? Your husband."

"Oh." I nod into the pillow and close my eyes. I am so tired.

The frost has killed off my hydrangeas. Even the soil beds beside the pathway look brutalised. A whitish hoar like the trail of a mad snail webs across it and the poor crumbled earth is cracked as winter lips. What did I expect? Trying for the impossible.

The wheelchair tips up sharply as we reach the first step and I grip the wooden arms.

"Turn her around," Christopher says and the porter pulls me back down with a bang and we dance a difficult manoeuvre in this too small space. I catch no one's eye, not Christopher's, not the nurse's who stands at the gate as if she has no idea what she should do. She's young, this one. Shouldn't be working up at the hospital at all. What if she catches the blinking thing from one of us?

And now I'm to be tipped out on top of a hibiscus. I might be something odorous steaming in a wheelbarrow. "If you could get the base, sir," the invisible porter says.

"Oh, yes, of course," he says and looks around as if someone might instruct him on the best way to dispose of the overnight bag in his hand. At last he spies the nurse and she comes forward, restored to her vocation as she takes on the onerous task of relieving him of it. What do these people do, I wonder, when they've no one to aid?

I quietly lift my feet from the ledge and touch *terra firma*. "Wouldn't it be easier," I say, "if I walk up?"

"Good Lord, Isabel, please be careful." Christopher rushes at me.

I am so cross I could hit him. He incenses me. Terribly unjust, I know. "I'm all right," I say as calmly as I can, but he already has my upper arms in a tight clench and he walks me around in a semi-circle as if I've lost the use of my legs. "Chris, please," I murmur and he instantly releases me.

The empty wheelchair bumps rapidly up the steps to the verandah, the porter absurdly hurrying to get out of the invalid's way. The new maid stands in the doorway, lacy white headpiece, starched apron, neat black dress, just as he wanted.

In the hospital's car, he'd said, "By the way, I had to let Mabel go. You'll need considerably more help now and this new girl can live in, which is what we need." I didn't respond. Instead I'd watched the curious as they stared at us along the road, noticed them hold back their children from running alongside the vehicle lest an infection were on board, and I'd pretended not to see Mrs Neville arriving breathless at the door of her Haberdasher's.

Christopher says quietly, "I hope she meets with your approval."

I stumble. My legs feel as if the bones have turned to jelly. The porter instantly releases the chair but Chris already has one hand gripped on my right arm, the other around my back. There's no point fighting him off again or I'll be out here all day.

The little maid drops a curtsey. Her eyes are wide with the drama and, actually, she's nervous of me, her new mistress. Her hand is shaking as she holds the front door back as far as she can, just the tiniest tremor, enough though. I smile at her. "Hello, dear," I say.

I hear the click of his tongue. Christopher cannot restrain himself, can he? What am I supposed to call her? I don't know her name, for one thing.

"How do you do, ma'am?" she says, politely trained. Probably told by her mother what she should say. "There's a cup of tea, ma'am."

"Oh, well, do you know what?" I say and I turn to stone, refuse Christopher's promptings to make me move onwards. "I think I'll have it upstairs in my room, if you wouldn't mind bringing it up. What's your name, dear?"

She turns quite pink, yet she's more relaxed. "Roberta, ma'am," she says.

"What a lovely name," I say. "Very unusual."

She drops her head and then glances up under very thick, dark lashes. "Yes, ma'am. It's because my father's name's Robert."

"Oh, I see!" I say and I hope I sound reasonably astounded.

She's overcome with such interest, for she seems at a loss. Then she says abruptly, "I'll get the tea," and very nearly runs down the hallway.

"Wouldn't it be best if you sat for a while down here," he says into my ear.

"No, I'd prefer to go upstairs, Chris, if you don't mind." I turn my head and see behind him the porter who is taking his leisure, seated now himself in the wheelchair, enjoying the winter sun. The young nurse, mimicking me, also turns her head and looks back at the gate, perhaps hopefully.

The yellow curtains of my room seem stiffened by their entrapment, tied back for the duration of my vacancy. Even they seem to have lost their familiarity. I sit down on the bed, more grateful than I care to show. Christopher, courteously enough in his usual manner, orders the nurse about the room, place the bag here, pour water from the jug into the glass there, unlace Madam's boots, if you'd be so good. I just wish they'd leave me alone.

He hovers over the bed as if that will satisfy either his need or mine. I watch the fingers of the crouching girl pluck at the laces. I hear him say, "You got a letter the other day. I put it there on your bed-side table."

I am awakened. There it is, yes, propped up against the crystal pedestal of the lamp. Marina? I lean and take hold of the envelope. It feels precious, warm. I turn it slowly around to see the script.

"I thought it might be of importance," he says quickly. "So I ... Hope you don't mind."

The flap is opened. He didn't even attempt to stick it down again. "No," I reply. What else can I say?

The nurse pulls hard at the second boot and she rocks backwards. Her hands stop her fall.

"Are you all right?" I say.

She rights herself and begins to stand up. "Yes, thanks." She studies her soft palms which have so abruptly met the floorboards. She'd like to go and I'd like her to go.

"Christopher," I say. "Why don't you take Nurse down to the car."

He assumes an air of confusion, perfectly genuine.

"Just ... take her downstairs," I say. "Thank you so much, Nurse. You've been so kind."

She smiles at me, her hands forgotten but I think she barely sees me. "All the best, Mrs Greene," she says as if the words don't quite belong to her. No doubt the valediction recommended by Matron to her fledgling staff as they lined up in a frightened row before her desk.

He puts out his arm as if to herd her from the room. It's of no concern to me. I stare at the envelope in my hand and very tenderly slide out the folded notepaper. But

something makes me look up. He's at the door, motionless, watching me. I gaze into his eyes.

*Lev Andreyavich has been very sick. They are maltreated very bad, we know. He is becoming better. The food is bad and cell is cold in winter. He hopes to depart very soon, I'm sure, and we also hope he is departing soon. I did not get response from you when I tell you previous letter what happened to Lucy and baby, put on ship unexpectedly with baby but now Lucy has not arrived to Ceylon where Vershkov was put off his ship many weeks ago. We don't know why. Mother and baby all alone now and I worry very much. Where will they put off ship? Odessa closed as Red Army takes it. Government is very bad for doing this, only small baby.*

There's a tap at the door. My head falls back against the bed head. The sky is freezing into evening. Soon stars will scatter across it, high and lustrous and lonely. I hear the dangerous clink of crockery. The door handle slowly twists.

Roberta has kicked it open, I gather, for it swings wide and she staggers in under the weight of the tray. "Your tea, Madam," she says. Here is another well-rehearsed line and she says it with such vim that I inwardly applaud her. No doubt there is some pleasure to be had in the performance though not for too long, I suspect.

"Thank you, Roberta. I'll shove over a bit and you can put the tray down on the bed beside me." Lev hasn't gone yet, that is something, isn't it? There is still hope.

"Maybe I should'a brought a smaller tray," she says and as I furtively shift my legs even further out of harm's way, she lowers it with an alarming strain of muscle. "Then it would fit on the bedside table."

"Oh, well."

"Will I be Mother?" she says as she grabs the handle of the China teapot.

I have to bite my lip. "Please do," I say. I quietly slide Marina's letter under the bedcover.

The teapot contains enough water for a tea-party, apparently, and her wrist shudders with the effort. I fear we could have a terrible accident. I watch while clear, brown liquid fills three-quarters of the cup. She then bends over almost double to replace the pot on its silver plate. When it is safely down, I ask, "Where are you from, Roberta?"

"Out along the Casino Road, ma'am. We have cattle and that." She stands up straight and, remembering her manners, folds her hands meekly in front of her apron.

“And do you have friends in town?” I pour my own milk and pick up the tiny coffee spoon. I must explain to her about the cutlery.

“Me sister works in the politician’s house. She began there last year.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? You’ll be able to visit each other.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she says and she smiles like a small girl. Her stiff shoulders drop happily. “I hope you feel a lot better soon, Mrs Greene. And oh, them flowers are from Mrs Martin. She came by a few minutes ago but she said not to disturb you.”

The posy lies flat on the tray, greenery mostly and three sprigs of boronia. She’s tied a red ribbon around the stems. I put the spoon down and reach for them. They smell of bush, tangy, peppery. I hear the crackle of dry leaf, the snap of twig underfoot, the incessant hum of hovering creatures all around, a lone bird screech.

“And I made samwiches and cut the crusts off. Ham and tomato and this one’s got cheese.” She pushes her finger into the white bread and I see it spring freshly back.

“Lovely. Thank you, Roberta.”

She stands there, staring at her production. But I’d guess she doesn’t know what else to do.

“I’ll just lie here and enjoy this,” I say, hoping to steer her in the direction of the door.

She continues to stand, clasping her hands again. And suddenly she jumps as if hit by an idea. “Just call if you need me,” she says.

“I certainly will. Thank you.”

I wait till she leaves, closes over the door. I feel under the sheet for the letter, and scan down the page till I find it. He hopes to depart very soon.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

The sky seems so clear. But it is an uncertain sameness. I gaze and find at last a winter sun, barely visible. The weak membrane of haze had seemed so perfect. Yet there is that one watery spot. My eyes narrow at the unexpected brightness. Anyway there is heat in it, a warming of the bones.

How I've dreaded the walk through town. I am not strong enough for the rubs of other people, the gay words I'll have to extricate from the fall of silence that's whitened over me these past weeks.

It's good to see the shops, all the same, the signs advertising imminently ending sales. I see Mrs Neville is still trying to sell off an unwise overstock of grey wool; not as much call for bucket-loads of woollen socks since the boys came home.

I don't care to pass the Wayfarers Hotel today. Its doors into the shadowed bar room are open and the echoes of men's voices sharpen against the cool walls, bounce out on to the street. There are too many of them in there, young men. They run like wild horses, rising dust. Afraid to be alone.

I step down on to the road, creating tiny storms myself. And here is Mrs Fanshawe, coming out of the chemist shop. She waits for me in front of the window display, the wooden tiers of brown bottles, ancient some of them, and a new selection of Parisian soaps. Parisian soaps all the way from Paris, I'm sure.

"I don't believe it," she says. "We were just talking about you, inside."

"How are you, Mrs Fanshawe?" I say and I kiss her musty cheek. She manages to have cake crumbs glued to the hairs above her lip even at this hour. And she smells of the sweetness of pastries, too, or is it rose perfume? I can never decipher the precise, rather heady, fragrance that emanates from her breath, her clothes.

"I have no complaints, Mrs Greene, dear. Just the same as ever. But you do look a little thin, don't you?" She holds my hand, pats it. "On the mend, that's the main thing. And to think it's all because you were doing a good deed. There's no justice in the world, that's for sure and certain."

I have no idea what she's talking about. I pat her hand too, more to distract her than anything.

“And how is she?” she asks.

“She?”

“Your cousin. After her terrible accident. I hope you don’t mind. Mr Greene happened to mention it to me one day.”

“Oh.” So that’s the story. “My cousin is quite well, thank you.”

“You must have found the heat awful up there, all summer. Was she under the care of a good surgeon? Those motor cars can be nasty things when they’re not handled correctly, I believe.”

“She’s right as rain. Getting married in a few weeks.”

“You don’t say. Well, well, isn’t that lovely. A nice young man just returned home, I bet.”

I pull away now, move around her and she pirouettes after me. It’s loneliness, that’s all, poor Mrs Fanshawe. She has a good heart.

“You’d win that wager,” I say and laugh, and take another step back. “Not so young though. They’re both past their first bloom, Mrs Fanshawe.”

“Oh! But all the better for that. All the better. And now, Mrs Greene dear, we’re all looking forward so much to seeing you at euchre on Saturday night. Our Saturday nights haven’t been the same since you left.”

“Not losing so much?”

She claps her hands, delighted. “Not losing so much, that’s right. We were always too busy enjoying ourselves, weren’t we? That’s what I miss. Mr Saunders takes it all so seriously when you’re not there.”

“Well, it’s lovely to see you. You’re looking very nice, by the way.”

She looks down quickly at her feet. I surmise she has new shoes, even though she’s too modest a person to draw attention to them. “Do you think? Thank you, dear.”

“Yes, you really do.” I wave my hand in a gesture of finality. I hear her saying goodbye as I walk off. At the corner I peek over my shoulder and she’s still there outside the chemist’s, gazing at the street as if she doesn’t know what to do next. Anything, I suppose, but go home to her own, empty house.

The two boys are sitting on the doorstep. It’s hard for them, I suppose. I hadn’t thought.

“All packed?” I say.

Frank looks up at me, shields his eyes. I must be standing in his sun. "Hello, Mrs Greene. Yes, I leave in the morning."

"I wanted to wish you well. I hope it all works out for you, Frank."

He stands up, surprisingly tall. He even puts out his hand and I take it. The tide moves so quickly. "Thank you, Mrs Greene. I'll try my best."

"I'm sure you'll do very well. And you'll have Paddy there, so that's good. He can show you the ropes."

"That's what he said in his letter. He'd show me the ropes."

"You'll miss your brother, Ted, won't you?" The younger boy has his head between his knees, watching some invisible thing. I put my hand on the gingery hair, feel the hay-dry mop between my fingers.

He shakes himself free. "Glad to see the back of him," he says. But he doesn't look up at me.

"He's just jealous," his older brother says. His voice has matured, too, no hint of warbling. The two of them were like baby birds at one time.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish," Ted says to his bare knee. And even that, the short pants of one, the other now with the look of a man. Ted was losing him anyway. The job up North only confirms it.

But they will banter on so long as I stand here, a captive audience. My skirt brushes the boy on the step. "Your mother in?" I say.

"Yes, ma'am," Frank says. "She may be out the back in the kitchen."

I knock without much conviction on the open front door and as I walk through the over-stuffed parlour, a handkerchief of a room, its entire inside wall taken up by the piano, I sing out, "Mrs Martin, you there?"

She appears at the kitchen doorway, out beyond the back door of the main cottage. "Stay put there, and I'll come into ya. Cuppa?"

"Yes, please," I shout. My voice barely knows how to raise itself.

The table is placed beneath a framed picture of a girl in an Indian canoe paddling down a forest-fringed stream. Three chairs are tucked in around it. She has scrubbed the surface white. I'm glad for the few moments alone, the chance to be still. I rest my arm alongside a jam jar filled with flourishing parsley. I pinch off a few leaves, chew on them.

"I was just making some anyway," she says as she steps back into the house. "Dratted range went out last night. Took us all morning to get it going again. Oh,



well.” She places the tin teapot on a square of thick crochet. Her arm is strong and steady. I’ve seen her wring out sheets till they are tight as a watch-spring, her wrists twisting with more determination than muscle. “Wait till I see what those two are doing,” she says and she stands for a moment at the parlour door. She wants privacy from the boys, it seems. “They’re gone off,” she says.

Her crockery is neatly stacked on a shelf that she has edged with a run of much fancier crochet. She told me once she crochets for the sake of peace. Peace of soul. Her handiwork fills my own linen drawer, too. As she lifts down two mismatched cups and saucers, she says, “I’m thinking of leaving.”

“Leaving? What, you and Ted?”

Her hands smell of Sunlight soap. She takes off the lid of the teapot and gives the water a swooping stir with a spoon. “I didn’t tell you that my job’s gone down to half time. That ... visit to Brisbane. He got in one of the boys just come home, to tide him over till I got back. And then he couldn’t let him go. So ...” Her hand opens, red and criss-crossed with fine lines. She’s been washing. “We’re sharing it.”

“I see.” And of course, Katherine’s job gone at the same moment. Here was I, worrying about money and how I’d cope on my own, when this was happening.

She pulls out a chair and sits down hard. “Oh, well,” she says again.

“Where will you go?” I am assailed by loss. A cold wind has blown off the mountains.

“Down to Sydney. We’ll have to. We’d be better off getting a place for the three of us. Anyway,” she says as she pours into my cup, “I’m not that happy with her being there on her own.”

“No.” I spoon sugar into my tea, my eyes carefully avoiding hers.

She doesn’t speak for a while. My spoon clinks against the china.

Then she says, “What about you?”

I look up. She’s taking a sip of black tea. “I’ll have to go, too,” I say.

“Is that a good idea?”

I shrug. “Good idea or not, I can’t stay. It’s killing me.”

I hear her blow softly on the hot liquid. She says, “That’s what my husband said.”

I close my eyes and I taste my own milky tea. I am all guilt these days. Guilt, and wanting. Wanting so much I could die from it.

“I think you’re right,” she says.

It's barely credible to me that she's said it and so quickly, so surely.

"What about him? The Russian," she says.

This is the first time she's mentioned him though he's hovered between us for long enough these past months. I say, "He'll be deported."

"Back to Russia? My God, you'd want to be mad."

"It's what he believes in."

"They're still shooting each other over there. We've had enough of all that."

"Well, if the Allies would just leave them alone to get on with it," I say. I don't even know if I believe that, either.

After a while, as we each concentrate on our tea, quietly sipping, she says, "So where does that leave you?"

"I don't know where that leaves me. I don't have an income." I glance at her, embarrassed. "Not enough, anyway."

"If it's to be, it will be," she says. "Maybe they won't deport him."

"Maybe."

She rests her head against the wall. Her eyes seem to see beyond the lace curtain on the kitchen window, beyond the dark walls of her outside kitchen. I gaze at her profile, the halo of light that rises from her skin.

"I thought it would be different, didn't you?" she says. Her chapped lips open as she raises the cup.

"Yes," I say.

# EPILOGUE

*MOSCOW, 1937*

Marina would hear of his arrest, Marina and Yuri Abramovich. And Marina would tell her. It mattered to him that she was told. He didn't want her waiting for the postman. And he just wanted her to know. He'd feel her presence. She would be whispering in his ear.

The foyer was paved in marble. They kicked up a ruckus, ten boots, in the great silence of the sleeping city, the snow-crisp air. An elbow jabbed into his back. He pulled the coat closer about him as they tumbled out into the breathtaking cold. The streetlight was broken again. Or still. And that was good.

He began to ease the letter down from his cuff. One of them opened the back door of the car. It whined on its hinges. It was his lucky night – they began to argue about who should sit in the front. Whoever lost the battle would be crushed up against him in the back seat, three peas in a pod, shoulders hunched. He began to climb in anyway, the good prisoner. The letter dropped in the snow and he kicked it under the darkness of the car's chassis.

He tried to draw himself in as a body bumped in on his right and another on his left. Each car door closed in a perfect rhythm, one after the other. They'd done this before, these boys.

He didn't look at the block of apartments as the car drove off. He'd never see it again in all probability. He'd been lonely there. And light had leaked out of him there, too. Slowly for the most part. But occasionally some spectacular betrayal, some unavoidable evidence that it'd all gone wrong, had caused him to sit all night at his table, the bottle of vodka emptied by morning. Everyone knew better than to talk to anyone else. Others had died for less, for nothing. He'd been raw from betrayal for a while, uselessly. This was life, as it turned out. The man he used to be hadn't understood that.

The car crossed the bridge. They were taking him to the Lubyanka. No bullet out in some forested field, not yet anyway.

It was strange even to him that he remained so calm, despite the nag of fear, the more pronounced heartbeat. He wished he could see more of the sky. A few stars far in the east, where he'd run thirty years ago when he'd escaped from another czar, across ice deserts, down into the swampy heat of China's coast, to the boat across the southern seas. Those few bright years that followed. It was a bright day, the day he'd met her. And she had remembered him. He was carried in her heart, her mind. He wanted her to know his gratitude, the hugeness of his thanks. He had been loved. If they shot him tomorrow, he was loved. Suddenly he knew, in a clarity more brilliant than any star, that his death was a small thing. She reached him across a thousand, ten thousand miles. It would reach beyond the hilarious drama that had been his life, too.

Anyway, the outcome was yet to be proved. The wheels crunched as the car slowly turned a corner. In the two beams of light he could almost see the low wind as it disturbed the packed white surface. He watched as snow loosened and wound itself into the air that hung just above it. By tomorrow morning, girls would slip and fall on their bottoms, and others would tread like cats to haul them to their feet. The long wait until spring greened the city would begin, and then the summer, the long days and, who knows, perhaps another winter. He saw the long yellow building ahead of him. The street lamps were working here, that was something.

The wind charged along the rim of the snow, down side streets, across the bridge, churning the river's iced water that yearned to flow again. It caught up the folded letter lying in a black pool of motor oil, ripped at it, cheekily hitching up the hem of neat folds. It snatched the top page away, till sheets floated like white sails on a kinder current. Two of them smacked into the naked torso of an unnamed tree and, when the gust died, they slid together down the glittering skin where more snow had formed itself into a hard crust. A branch dropped a fistful of its own and this fell in a wet lump on the pages, anchored them down. The paper dampened and the bottom line began to melt.

*arrives today, driving up again as he did last year. I wish he'd catch the train. It's such a long and arduous drive, down the mountains. I enjoy his being here, Lev. One week a year when we actually are kind to one another, laugh together. Truthfully, it's easy these days. He wants to come, year after year, and I'm happy to have him here, to spend Christmas Day with him in a peace we never had when we were man and*

wife. Christmas can be lonely for him and I don't want that. I've made the cake and the pudding. I look forward to cooking the chicken and ham on the big day, and laying the table and all of it. I miss you, that's all.

I want to get this posted before Christmas comes. There's so much to tell you. My purple bougainvillea is finally flowering, you'll be pleased to hear. I took a new cutting from Madeleine's only a few weeks ago and planted it out, then lo and behold this monstrous, weaving thing along the verandah suddenly broke into bloom, out of affront if you ask me.

No, I'm never nervous here at Aberdeen on my own. I've loved this house all my life. It's like catching fairy dust, to have it for myself. It doesn't seem possible to have something so beautiful. But I do.

I had a trail of ants climbing up my bedroom wall this morning. Heaven knows what they were after. Something sweet in the rafters. Let's hope it's not the carcasses of termites. Are black ants cannibals? I'm not sure.

Yes, and you asked about Katherine Martin. Did she just pop into your head? I'll tell you now that I wondered if she took your fancy, when I first knew you. No need to comment. She writes to me, you know. I've become quite a proficient letter writer in my old age. Not a lot to do here alone at night in the bush, as you can imagine. So I write long letters. You remember her brother Paddy? He died of tuberculosis about five years ago. Apparently when he was wounded, he lay in the field for more than twenty four hours before the orderlies could risk going out for him. There was a low fog of gas, it seems, quite near him. He didn't have his gas mask when they found him, and it wasn't anywhere near him, anyway he was unconscious. The gas got into his lungs. An awful lot of them have died recently from that. It came out in the T.B. in the end. Katherine has her ups and downs, but she is a lovely person. Her sister Mary and Stephen moved back down home quite a while ago. He has aged very early. An unhappy man. They used to live only a few miles from my grandmother's house. They'd pop in here, or I'd go up to them. He went back down to take over his father's entire business after he died. Ironic, isn't it? Mary was pleased.

I take on board about being circumspect. It breaks my heart, though, what that implies. For your heart, I mean. Don't forget Pushkin, dearest. Beauty is in your hands, no one else's. Go and fish the book out from the bottom of your wardrobe, and light your fire, pour yourself a glass of vodka and read it again. Think of me in the

*heat, my feet propped up on a footstool, perched in the corner of the verandah to catch the breeze and a glass of cold lemon squash beside me, a book of Barrett Browning's sonnets on my lap. Do you recall when I recited one of them to you? I was so shy then. Let me count the ways. I was surprised I remembered all the lines. I have it opened at that page right now, as a matter of fact.*

*You can't believe I have regrets? No, love, I don't. You wakened me. I am not who I was before I met you. I shiver to think of the darkness of my life if I never had. If I regret, it's the bewilderment that blew me this way and that. That is the order of remorse, my own silliness, nothing more. The years before I first wrote to you were hard, very hard, yes. I can only tell you how very much at peace I am now. How profoundly joyful I am that we speak to one another like this. It is not nothing, Lev, or less than I deserve or any of those things you say. It's superb, it's wondrous, it makes my life glitter with light. I don't have that shyness anymore. What I feel in my heart I gladly say to you, dearest friend in all the world.*

*And now tell me how Anna gets on at school. What does she say in her letter to you this New Year? She'll be old enough to travel to Moscow by herself soon, you'll see. I know how she sees you, Lev. Not as you fear at all. You don't know yourself. She'll love you all her life, you know.*

*Marina and Yuri will come here just after Christopher leaves. They and their two youngest. The eldest girl married in spring. Imagine! It was a gorgeous wedding, real Russian style. If you'd been there, we would have danced and danced and*

**THE END**

# PART TWO

## THE EXEGESIS

“LET ME TELL MY STORY”  
CHOOSING ISABEL AND HOW A METAPHOR  
MADE HER RIGHT



## INTRODUCTION

All happy novels are alike but an unhappy novel is unhappy in its own fashion. *The Russian and Mrs Greene* falls into the latter category and it is all Mrs Greene's fault. Novelists are not only story-tellers; they also make up people who are coyly called characters. They are not real people, of course, everyone knows that. On the other hand, the realer they are, the better. People like to see people falling in love on screen, getting divorced in magazine short stories, tossing witticisms around like confetti on stage. We like to see ourselves mirrored in a myriad of possible realities, while safe in our seats. We've been prone to this behaviour since long before Aristotle, who merely studied the phenomenon.

The difficult process of writing this novel leads me to state the obvious: novelists and readers differ in their relationship with "characters". As the novelist then, in this exegesis I will assess certain "formal" properties of the lead character in my novel, *The Russian and Mrs Greene*. I'll take a brief overview of some theories of character in Chapter One.

A character may lead the writer through the writing and indeed when the character flows from the start, for all the hiccups of the next hundred thousand words, the author may sometimes say, "that novel wrote itself". But when the character/characters refuse to yield themselves up, the process can be long, brittle and possibly end in failure. In *The Russian and Mrs Greene* the second scenario played itself out upon me, alack. I discovered this also in my previous novel, *The Rhapsody of Sweeney* (unpublished), while earlier titles of mine were a sweeter process. Interestingly, both of these difficult novels were based on an historical incident around which the edifice of a created fiction had to build itself. These two novels shared something else. Again and again, I asked myself this question: Who will tell the story? And I struggled to hear the answer. Ultimately, in *The Russian and Mrs Greene*, that answer came from

Isabel Greene, who seemed to demand my attention. In this study I will examine how and why I finally gave in to that demand. Why does a novelist “pick” a certain character to dominate a novel? In particular terms, why Isabel?

Since “she” was so problematic for me, I also want to attend to the niggling worry of whether and to what extent Isabel Greene, as lead character, hi-jacked the original intentions of my novel. By “intentions” I mean those early formulations which establish the potential for a specific novel to be written; in this case I could say there was primarily one, which then engendered two related sub-intentions. As I will show, the choice of Isabel seemed to set me on a path straying far from these. In Chapter One, I will present these “intentions” and later explore the text for signs of betrayal or adherence.

Until I had settled on Isabel, the various attempts at drafting did not get very far. Opening paragraphs, pages, even a few chapters were tried and discarded. Easy to say, but tough on the author. The introduction of a fresh element into the story, the Red Flag Riots of 1919, changed the chronology, the plot line and the characters’ roles. In Chapter Two, I’ll trace how various characters seemed in line for the starring role, some later disappearing for good and others suffering demotion in their reincarnation. I will examine how they may have been relevant in the subsequent development of Isabel and how certain common factors can be recognised – relationship to author, the novel’s theme, imagery. I will seek to understand how she crept up to prominence and how the concentration on Isabel/le as the consciousness of the novel, her observing role, the studied difference between social perceptions of her versus her self-at-home seem to be relevant.

Having established her as both narrator and leading character, I then had to find her method of delivery. In Chapter Three, I will leave examination of the early drafts and begin to deal with the text of the novel as it is now. I will present a brief view of person and tense and the pros and cons of my decisions in these. I have chosen the First Person-Present Tense where the limits of Isabel’s present-time knowledge and certain flaws in her “character” blocking her understanding could be problematic. I will put forward that these problems did, in fact, open up an ironic gap to possible good effect.

This distancing has set up a certain disdain for Isabel in the author and I suggest that a relationship between author and character could well be a major motivator in the choice of a novel's lead character. Isabel not only "relates" to me, the author, but to the reader. I show how she is Us in our present uncertain view of political and religious absolutes. Her relativity opens her to criticism as a character who does not decide in the Aristotelian sense and I will briefly look at Benjamin's study in this regard.

The weakness I seem to denigrate in her fits her more properly into Aristotle's requirement for identification. Nussbaum (1986, p. 386) suggests that in his "ranking of poetry above history as a source of wisdom", Aristotle means that "the events narrated by history are so idiosyncratic that they prevent identification". Isabel is an invented character placed in the context of both invented and historical situations, most particularly the Red Flag Riots. Her fictional engagement with history turns the actual episodes into an inner experience. As a result, the desire motif which now dominates the novel has apparently led the novel astray from my original "intention". I place Isabel's desire within the Ovidian tradition of split consciousness but I am specifically worried by his model of internalising this conflict only in the case of female characters. I confess my unease with this development in my novel.

Having displayed my fears that I have somehow betrayed the trust placed in me by my own original intentions, in Chapter Four I will look at another formal level of Isabel's characterisation. Since she is narrator, her language and the images she uses become necessarily the only tool I have to express the novel's thrust and focus. One over-riding metaphor dominates and it is that of the Garden. I will devote a lengthy examination to its employment to discover if this language layer does in fact prove whether or not I have betrayed those intentions. I will show how the Paradise motif and its trajectory fit the plot-line, underpin the themes and hark back to the original intentions of *The Russian and Mrs Greene*. The rightness of my choice of Isabel as lead character may rise or fall on her empathy with garden imagery.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “LET ME TELL MY STORY”

Such famous admissions as that of Tolstoy in reference to the “unexpected” and “unwilled” evolution of the character of Anna Karenina in the novel suggest that the genesis of poetic forms is, at certain points at least, productively resistant and opaque to the previsions and control of the writer.

Steiner (1986, p. 289)

Characters in a novel can be a blessing or a curse to the author. When they are good, they are very, very good. But when they are bad, they are wicked. The narrator/major character in *The Russian and Mrs Greene* was elusive and difficult to handle and I have not quite forgiven her. Personally, I don't like her. She did not perform eagerly for me as did Lilian in my novel, *The Italian Romance*. She did not throw herself into the opening passage without hesitation as my heroine in *Bad Blood* insisted on doing. No, Isabel Greene snuk around corners and peeped from behind yellow blinds. And when I finally tracked her down, she turned out to be mealy-mouthed and quite unsuitable, at least as far as I could ascertain. All this made my task even harder than the arduous mountain-climb of writing a novel usually is. On the other hand, this recalcitrance of Isabel's might make her an interesting subject of study. How did she come about and to what extent does she perform her task, in spite of her “unsuitability”?

If to some extent in the following pages I seem to ignore what is probably the basic connection of character to reader, let me say that I'm approaching this study as the author, a very different fish. Nevertheless, I remind myself of this fundamental signalled by Price (1975a, p. 613) when he states that in Forster's

*Passage to India*, Aziz as "... the most fully realized character ... provides the narrative matrix. He undergoes the most varied and intense experience and he includes the greatest range of feeling". To suggest that this holds some key to the importance of Aziz (as it does) echoes something of Joyce's feeling for "whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings" (Price 1975b, p. 379). This gravity behind the portrayal of human beings in fiction is easily overlooked. It is extremely difficult for the author to discuss. The making of a character is also a plastic thing, however, and is much more amenable to discussion.

In his review of Harvey's *Character and the Novel*, John Bayley (1966) rather dismally suggests that "the ability to create characters" has ceased to be "any kind of criterion of artistic excellence" and he quotes Harvey's contention that a simple procedure of prolonged exposure can produce the "reality" of a character in much the same way that a year's viewing of *Coronation Street* transforms the "grotesquely spurious and artificial" into an illusion of "considerable reality". Bayley puts the novelist in an unenviable position when he says that we "can only imitate life if we do not perceive the difficulties of doing so, and those who are still not aware of them are likely to lack the artist's intelligence and vision".

This is *Catch 22*. Nevertheless, most novelists still blithely create characters. Rawdon Wilson's (1979, pp. 725-8) then eight-year-old daughter gives characters a complete response because she understands they are not *only* in her mind's eye. She also knows the distinctions that should be made. And above all, she knows it takes a "good story to make the imagination respond." Wilson's assertion is that his daughter "appropriates an indefinite series of consciousnesses to make them, in containing them, the absolute property of her own consciousness". These fictive consciousnesses then become actual for her. The portrayal of consciousness is "one of the unmistakable achievements of Western literature", yet still one must "initially descend from the charismatic consciousness to a more mundane character" where things become no clearer at all. Character is a puzzling chimera.

A 17<sup>th</sup> century English “how-to” text on creation of character limits itself to such advice as: “chuse a subject, viz. such sort of men as will admit of variety of observation, such be, drunkards, usurers...lawyers...an upstart gentleman” and then “express their natures...aims...by witty Allegories, or Allusions, to things or terms in nature, or art, of like nature and resemblance” and finally “[C]onclude with some witty neat passage, leaving them to the effect of their follies and studies” (Joseph 1950, p. 144).<sup>1</sup> Rawdon Wilson (1980, p. 138) puts forward an apparently more sophisticated view with that same century’s *Don Quixote* where an “extreme modification of the Ovidian split awareness” results in “the creation of character with a recognisable cognitive structure and depth of mind” becoming “a common possibility”. Wilson describes Ovid’s “strategy” where the character is split by “a double awareness of two conflicting values” in tales of women such as Medea and Scylla.

Bayley (1974, pp. 225-7) suggests a profound difference between exploring consciousness in the modern novel and “old-type” characterisation where the author and reader share a rapport whereby “we know what to think of” the character. Stiva, for example, is “the end product of this point of intersection between Tolstoy and ourselves. We know what we think, therefore Stiva is”. In the “masterpieces” of the past, the “very air of spontaneous creation” emanating from characters “arises from a deep unconscious confidence by the novelist in his knowledge of what they really are”.

If it’s true that Tolstoy (and Jane Austen, as Bayley further claims) among others *knew* their characters with unconscious confidence, then Nadine Gordimer is a novelist of very different stripe – or at least betrays the conscious lack of confidence befitting our era. Quoting Gordimer’s admission that, “My characters always begin by being an enigma to me...I know something about them. Then as the novel, the story, develops I learn more”, Brenkmann (2000, p. 288) puts forward that the “limits or gaps in omniscience are in fact part of the very shaping of characters; the precise nature of the limit acquires significance within a novel’s larger patterns and purposes”.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph quotes from Ralph Johnson’s “The Scholar’s Guide” published in London, 1665.

Cixous and Cohan (1974) take issue with “character” as “preconceived or created by an author”:

The ideology underlying this fetishization of “character” is that of an “I” who is a *whole* subject (that of the “character” as well as that of the author), conscious, knowable... (Cixous and Cohan, 1974, p. 385)

Cixous continues that for the reader to recognise himself, the character must have fulfilled “the norms” and behind all this is “some reality principle (‘Life’, ‘truth’, ‘biography’, ‘sense’) to which the text is subordinated”. The reader/audience, in this recognition, performs “some spectacular operation that consists of the Ego’s (re) appropriation of itself”. Cixous honours the “open, unpredictable, piercing part of the subject, this infinite potential to rise up” and she claims that the “concept” of “character” excludes this potential. “Character” is reduced to role-playing. What is the answer?

‘I’ must become a ‘fabulous opera’ and not the arena of the known....Literature has been at work for a long time on this subversion ... (Cixous and Cohan, 1974, pp. 384-9)

H. Porter Abbot (1993, pp. 393-4)) asks why it is that while in some modernist texts “traditional character dissolved, giving way to entities like the infinite subjectivity of *Finnegans Wake* [etc]”, there is a “continuing, often brilliant delineation of character in modernist texts”. Abbot does not believe it’s a case of “old practice” overlaying “new theory”. Examining Virginia Woolf, Abbot comes to propose a “midcourse correction” to the view that “the idea of narrative and character as fundamentally exclusive, delimiting, phallogentric entities” and the correction is this:

[The] formal action of enclosing and completing is, for Woolf, as mysterious and unpredictable in its operation as anything in her work. In other words, what is hidden, disruptive, fluid, rupturing in Woolf’s art is

matched in exotic appeal with the shape-making capacity, the magical element of design... (Abbot 1993, pp. 402-3)

Tolstoy seems to suggest characterisation as the mirroring process of which Cixous is dismissive where, in his *What is Art* (1983, p. 49), he considers that speech “transmitting the thoughts and experiences of men, serves as a means of union among them” and that Art acts similarly. According to Hagan (1969), at the heart of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* is “the conception of spiritual pilgrimage”. But it is interesting to note that the author achieves the manifestation of this conception in the use of:

metaphors for the true and false values by which the characters live, and for the states of soul which living by those values produces. The false values can create not only literal war, but strife and disorder in the soul, whereas the true values lead ultimately to spiritual peace. (Hagan 1969, p. 235) <sup>2</sup>

It should be clear, therefore, that the transmission Tolstoy referred to is brought about by means other than merely relating what the character did and said. It is not just the simple means of allowing identification (words and actions which “ring bells”) that constitutes a characterisation. Language is not just a pretty thing or the means of relaying the plot. It can be usefully employed to say much more than itself.

Wilson’s (1979, pp. 731-8) examination of writings on character, following an Aristotelian paradigm of classification of causes, reveal to him four possible critical models: characters are a product of the author’s mind; characters are functions of the text; characters are artificial constructs to be analysed in terms of compositional techniques; and characters are to be considered *as if* they were actual persons having an effect on the reader.

---

<sup>2</sup> I will look at my own novel, *The Russian and Mrs Greene*, from the perspective of the metaphor of the Garden, but here it is of interest to note that I signalled something similar to this “spiritual pilgrimage” referred to in Hagan by my naming the two parts of my novel consecutively “War” and “Peace”. No coincidence, of course, though as much intuitive as thought-out. The “Russian-ness” of my novel’s concerns is not insignificant in the allusion, either, pointing to the complexity of influence on any particular novel.



Essentially, there seems to be two approaches around which the critical methods cluster. One might be seen best in the light of autonomy theory, illustrated by Ortega y Gasset:

Not only is grieving and rejoicing at such destinies as a work of art presents or narrates a very different thing from true artistic pleasure, but preoccupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper. (Harvey 1965, p. 212)

The mirroring which results in the excitement of the emotions applauded by Aristotle (1965, ed. Dorsch, p.17) is the other approach. It seems to me that when looking at character the novelist herself takes interest in the *hows* of her characterisation while her readers focus on the characters as personalities. This is not to say that the author doesn't "respond" to her character. Indeed she does, as my "relationship" with Isabel will show. Not to be denied, though, is that the response of the imagination is what novelists (of my type, anyway) want from their readers. Though Wilson's daughter would not have realised it at the time, it is up to novelists to give the necessary stimulus for this response to happen adequately.

I've said that finding my lead character in *The Russian and Mrs Greene* was problematic. To some extent, this was caused by a conflict between my original intentions and subsequent additional material. But let me begin at the beginning.

### The First Intention

Flanagan says he grew up with stories everywhere and any good story will stay with you.

"You don't understand them and it's precisely because you don't understand them that you don't lose them and one day the soil's ready and you're ready and you plant them." (Staeger 2008)

A novel has a genesis, even if only a fleeting image behind which is an unconscious desire to explore “feeling”. In the making of this novel, I could say I had three related intentions<sup>3</sup>. For the sake of clarity, I will call the first the “anecdotal intention”. *The Russian and Mrs Greene* sprang from a story told to me by my grandmother. Unlike many of her stories, I recall hearing this one only once but I remembered it vividly. She said that when the border between New South Wales and Queensland was closed during the Spanish ‘Flu epidemic, “the boys” who’d just come home from the Great War and who were attempting to cross into their own state from the NSW side took matters into their own hands. They “slipped across the border at night”. As a child, I was unaware of the gravity of this “Flu” and of the fact that it killed tens of millions of people world-wide within 18 months. The boys slipping across at night remained a romantic image in my mind.

When, to quote Flanagan, the soil was ready, I resurrected the anecdote and thought it would be the central point around which the entire “feel” of my grandmother’s stories of life in the bush in her time would congregate – family stories, intersections with the politics of the day such as the conscription referenda, the valiant mother, the Irish connection, the images she painted of the lyre birds which seemed to give her so much amusement, the “scrub” at whose mention she’d screw up her nose, the peopling of the border town, and the barely hinted-at battle between mother (my great grandmother) and son as he tore away from her principled stand against the “empire’s war” and enlisted. Setting the greater (personal) story against the focus point of just that moment in time – war, revolution, a plague-like disease, social unrest – would give it a “charge” that it might otherwise lack. The stories would circle around the “grave and constant” poles of hope and disappointment.

The initial intention then was generated from the thrill of an amalgam of childhood stories. I had a sense of the characters in these stories and a feel for the magic bush and the illustrious railway town where they walked and rode their horses and danced. I wanted to honour these characters and there seems to

---

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s *orexis* contains something of the English word “intentionality”. As the motive of action, *orexis* is a central tenet of his philosophy. See Nussbaum’s treatment (Nussbaum 1986), particularly Chapter Nine.

be a substantial desire not to lose the memories that I had been given, in trust so to speak. At least, it feels like trust. Because the teller of my stories was a girl herself when the “events” happened, the youth of at least some of these characters was very relevant. Their escapades, playfulness, their “bush knowledge” and lovely familiarity with the birds and animals enchanted me. As I grew older, the gravity of certain situations slowly seeped into me. The war. Conscription. My great grandmother’s valour at local meetings and demonstrations, her voice raised to question the “big wigs”. And when the day came that I was hit by the unremarked discrepancy of my Uncle Pat’s voluntary enlistment in that same war to which his mother was so averse, perhaps a fledgling novelist’s nose twitched.

Underneath all of this, however and most importantly, was the feeling quality of the story. Like all story-receivers, I was not listening with a heart of stone, not to any of it. It was all so idyllic, bathed in sunshine, people and birds and animals living in the bush in sublime harmony. The young people were so full of life and fun and adventure. But there was a war, there was disharmony in the town and in the family. And later life, as I knew from early on, had not been a bed of roses for any of them. The Great Depression and the Second World War followed (and I had stories of these too, but as if in sequence just as my grandmother had lived them). Personal lives were far from pain-free. Perhaps this is why I was so drawn to the earlier stories of the sequence, the days when life was flooded in a gold light.

As I began to form a novel, a book I’d read some years before lurched up in my consciousness. It was *Incognito* by Romanian writer Petru Dumitriu (1964). I had been deeply touched by it and had walked around with it clutched to my bosom with the kind of passionate response only a younger woman could give. His novel relates a before and after. It paints a picture of youth in a most beautiful place, an Eden-like garden, but war and the Soviet take-over create a different reality. I instinctively recognised this pattern when I considered the trajectory for my own novel, that very early architecture which seems to present itself without thought. I knew that pattern, had always understood the “feeling” quality of the movement. And I knew it was like that for the cloud of

participants in my real/imagined story. Not that my grandmother had pointed this fall from grace out to her little grand-daughter. My heart not-of-stone had figured it out.

### The Second Intention

The feistiness of my great grandmother may well be the spark which heats the world view in which I had been educated. In this view, the family existed in society but all was not perfect there. This fly in the ointment could best be summarised as class. The concept of class does not exist without the potency of conflict even where the circumstance is relatively benign. Because it is so integral to the overall family story, this societal element was from the start an “intention” of the novel. From the novelist’s point of view, I needed a “rub” – an idiosyncratic word I used here to describe the “feel” of presenting class conflict. And so arose the demand that I produce another character/characters distinct from the fictional family circle.

I went to the anecdotes. I had been struck as a child with the “story” of the friendship between my own great grandmother (a Clare woman, a Roman Catholic, a fervent Irish nationalist, and “lace-poor” Irish) and the Methodist minister’s wife – at least, this is how I remember it. It seemed to me, even hearing the tale in the 1950s, that this was surely an unlikely pairing. Perhaps in reality it was not, but it was my sense of it as so which kept the memory in play for me. I decided, therefore, to throw the minister’s wife into the pot. And that is how Mrs Greene (originally Grahame, but both invented names) emerged as the figure I chose on the one hand to display class and on the other to work my way out of one-sidedness.

No writer is exempt from rootedness, just as no thinker is free of cultural conditioning, no mystic liberated entirely from image. And so, recognising this, my novel could never be an “outsider’s” view and must be tainted with affection for one “side” and antipathy for the other. Nevertheless my wish was to try to step outside, as most novelists do tend to wish. Mrs Grahame/Greene was at the start a minor character even while it became obvious quite soon that

she was an *essential* character because of her “socio/political” role in the novel’s workings. Regretfully, I had to admit my sympathies were all with the family and poor old Mrs Grahame/Greene got little. Perhaps that’s why I fleshed her out a little in the early drafting – to show a more sympathetic side in spite of myself.

### The Third Intention

The “religious” heart of the socio/political position propping up the family story is what interests me and I wanted to explore it, to understand it better. I was drawn to ponder on the why of the broiling political stance of that family. In a sense it is almost irrelevant to this study what that stance was, but let it be said that it was an Australian labour position best summed up by the refrain, “what’s best for the working man”. This refrain suggests a pragmatism, a non-affiliation with ideology<sup>4</sup> – even though it’s true to say there was established a handful of dogmas, chief of which, from knowledge gained by my own association with it, being the requirement to never cross a picket line. Paradoxically “something” of this stance did become a religion of sorts, not only for my family but for vast numbers of traditional Labor people. This pondering is what constitutes the third intention of the novel.

### Eureka!

But something happened during the research. Working from the intentions, I was concentrating my efforts on the “life” of the town in question (local newspapers, introductory connections with the town’s history buffs) and on the historical facts of the Spanish ’Flu and of the war particularly as these impacted on the area. Out of the blue, I stumbled upon an incident in Brisbane in 1919. It was a Eureka! moment for me. The incident (or series of incidents, in fact) had

---

<sup>4</sup> “Clearly, to many workers, ...basic material computations overshadowed any dreams about a future socialist millennium. A choice between the existing parliamentary forces seemed to them the only choice which made sense.” Evans (1988, p. 98)

not found its way into the anecdotes. For one thing, Brisbane is a few hundred miles up the road. Leaving this awkward reality aside surely my discovery was serendipitous but who can tell with these things?

Briefly, Russian Bolsheviks had been arriving in Australia, many of them settling in the north, for some years before the war. As the war ended and their own Russian Revolution had succeeded, local antagonism towards them grew. In 1919, ex-soldiers marched on the Russian headquarters twice in one week. Violent riots ensued and over the following days and weeks, ironically, Russians were arrested. Some were deported. I was also very struck by the fact that among those who made it back to Russia, four were later executed by Stalin.<sup>5</sup> This was poignant in itself but also spoke of the later collapse of the experiment in the 1980s. The disappointment that was snapping at the heels of all their wild hopes had finally pounced and overcome them.

When this episode fell into my lap, the mechanics of incorporating it into a story supposedly springing from the first (anecdotal) intention became a problem. Why it seemed so utterly important that it were incorporated I cannot explain, except that it seemed to excite me and overpower my sense of what I had previously thought I was doing. It was an extreme of the political curiosity I had from the start, perhaps. I knew that the group I grew up amongst were reasonably radical but also that they were not Red. Reflecting on this as I surveyed the (now) two concurrent story lines, I began to understand that the essentially pragmatic position of Australian labour underscores why it ultimately did not support Bolshevism and why a secondary conflict between the two groups was played out during the period alongside the wider conflict of capitalism/business interests versus workers/leftists. The Brisbane episodes were complex and speak of Australia's close call with revolution and its "decision" not to go down that path.

Alongside all this, there was another, less rational, reason for the pressure to use this new element. Russia and the Queensland coast clashed as images and this had potency and romance. There is an echo here of my fascination with imagery from the original anecdotes.

---

<sup>5</sup> I owe the whole of the Red Flag riots story to Raymond Evans' work, particularly his *Red Flag Riots* (1988).

I bowed to the pressure and the Bolshevik incident entered as just a part of the over-arching story of the “times”. Technically, the problems of incorporation were these: as the Red Flag Riot events happened in Brisbane, how would I take the setting up across the border from the railway town in NSW; *who* would see these riots, if they were to be more than a newspaper article the next day; how would the story as a whole make good use of the incidents and integrate them into a unified presentation rather than a series of this-happened-then-that-happeneds; and to what extent does the theme of the novel clarify itself or adjust itself through this new element? I suspect I was not aware of “theme” at all. To the extent that I was even barely aware of it, it seems to have gone underground at this point to re-emerge very much later in the novel. In fact I would say that I saw the theme most clearly as I finished the final drafts, though it appeared as a strong unifier throughout the body of the work in spite of my unawareness.<sup>6</sup>

### The Missing Plot

Beginning with all this wealth was one thing, finding the story line quite another, for novels are not lists of events, no matter how charming or distressing. Novels need a plot.

For Peter Brooks (1996, p. 326) plot is “somehow prior to those elements most discussed by most critics” and he claims that plot may be the most fundamental formative element of narration. Friedman (1967, p. 151) presents Professor R. S. Crane’s “plot” as a “composite of action, character and thought rather than merely equating it with ‘action’”. Crane (1967, p. 143) distinguishes this composite from the form of the plot, or its “working or power” in the tragedy, for instance, and he goes on to say that this power is “the capacity of its unified sequence of actions to effect through pity and fear a catharsis”.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Milan Kundera (2005) sees thematic unity as guaranteeing a novel’s coherence, as I point out later.

<sup>7</sup> I understand Crane to be drawing not only from Aristotle’s *Poetics* but from his important work on form as soul, a tricky term which includes but is not limited to the function and purpose of the thing. Apart from one exceptional case, Aristotle’s soul does not exist without its

It can't be ignored that readers, listeners to tales, theatre audiences, like to be given a story. Story is "what the book is about". I take Genette's point that "a story need not be interesting to be a story" (Genette 1988, p. 19). All the same, it worries me that my story may indeed be not all that interesting. Whatever about that anxiety, I could state that overall I sense an obligation to tell some kind of story as I write a novel.

In this case, I presented myself with anecdote and historical event and asked myself to write a novel out of them. Scholes and Kellogg (1968, p. 211) point out that the author applies "selectivity", as I most certainly have in discarding various anecdotal memories. To put it another way, I am organising. Around what? I suggest that in saying "[a]ll plots depend on tension and resolution", Scholes and Kellogg (1968, p. 212) imply that the author's antennae seeks the conflict around which the events spin.

For the type of writer I am, the appeal is for a conflict which happens on the mundane and personal level, whether it is linked in plot to the more general (worldly) conflict or not. The simple mechanics of story require conflict (even as mild as a previous state giving way to a new):

[It] is likely that the story will have a hero, or a heroine...someone with whom...we can identify....Then something happens....This...provides the 'Call' which will lead the hero or heroine out of their initial state into a series of adventures or experiences which ...will transform their lives.  
(Booker 2004, p. 17)

The family, still the focus of my attention, was clearly the place to look for this playing out of conflict. In a note <sup>8</sup> to myself I envisaged a denouement where "the mother says, 'Are you trying to destroy this family?' to younger daughter who loves older sister's husband". Here would be the family story echoing the betrayal of war. This seemed to be the spinning point of the novel.

---

related "matter". Soul is the "thisness" of the thing, as well as its *raison d'être*. See Aristotle's *De Anima* for his detailed work on this subject.

<sup>8</sup> I wrote numerous notes and reports before and during the writing of the novel, some of which I quote in this exegesis without further reference.



The sisters stepped forward as focal points of the novel but also, now that the Red Flag Riots had entered the scene, as the obvious candidates for bringing in this new element. After all, the boys were off at war while the Russians<sup>9</sup> in Brisbane were gathering their strength. One of the girls could go up to Brisbane to work, perhaps. Which one, the elder who married the love interest or the younger who loved him? Or should someone else go up to Brisbane?

The sheer mechanics caused me many headaches. As plot thrust forward, character had to rush around to the flank to protect the field from falling into disarray. The struggle around plot manifested itself to me as a character problem.<sup>10</sup> At this point, plot seemed to be leading character or at least it was leading decisions around character.

### Who Will Tell This Story?

The child's plea of "tell me a story", so intimately connected with this novel's genesis, begs the question of who will tell it. Throughout all the preparatory work, that question niggled and repeated itself. And the answer refused to come.

Initially I had envisaged a novel written in the third person, open to a few perspectives – and this to achieve two ends: 1) through difference, to examine class and attitudes towards the war/the Empire versus the Republic; 2) a combined "voice", representing the human experience of peace followed by war finally transcended into a more knowledgeable peace (something like Dumitriu's *Incognito?*). This approach would culminate in a final scene on a train where a variety of voices would almost coalesce. Here I had a romantic and inflated aspiration of building to a hymn "sung" (figuratively) by all the variant participants. But somehow, this idea lost its allure. None the less, the wider community involvement in the idyll/fall from grace/new reality motif remained important to me.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Russian activists included Mensheviks and Bolsheviks before 1917. Mensheviks were given leave to return home after the first Revolution, but their government was overthrown later in 1917 by the Bolsheviks. In Australia, following British and American advice a crackdown on Russian repatriation was brought into play and Bolsheviks were refused leave to return.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is what Crane meant by the "composite", cited in Friedman (1967).

The path I didn't go down was one approaching that which Bakhtin (1984, p.6) extols in Dostoevsky, where there is a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices...". The very Russian-ness of the approach (as it manifested in that era) woke my interest in this. But I am not sure I would have any idea how to attempt it. At any rate, I was pulled more naturally in another direction. There seemed to be an inner drive to find just one voice to tell the story, though I had not fully arrived at that conclusion as yet. At this stage, I was trying to find the best point of view. I was doing, perhaps, as Henry James suggested: "James always sought for the right 'central intelligence' or 'reflector' as the personality through which to tell his story ..." (Macauley and Lanning 1964, p. 99).

Valerie Martin's *Property* (2003) strikes me as an instance of using one voice not in the sense of simply perceiving the story's world *from* a particular viewpoint but more importantly of seeing *through* this particular perception to a more varied experience. Other characters in her novel, particularly Sarah, show a reality different from the narrator Manon's and this conflict produces in the reader a chill of acknowledgement. Indeed, Martin's method in this novel may reveal the flaws of the morality of slavery more sharply than historical/factual approaches. I read Martin's novel during the thinking period before the drafting of my novel properly began and was influenced by it. I later discarded a few options for the lead character perhaps for the very reason that my ultimate choice allowed such a "seeing through".

As I now follow the long and winding road which led me to the final version of Isabel Greene, I'll recall my notes and examine the early drafts. Let me raise the flag to state that until the character question had been answered, no draft managed to get very far and so I will deal in the next chapter with drafts of an incomplete novel with unrealised plots.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

#### I – The Original Cast

I had one image in my mind from quite early on and it had very little to do with Isabel. It was of a girl outside on a bush plain, heat on her skin, the narcosis of a breeze blowing from across “the border”. Innocent, she barely notices clouds building up in the north – the author pointing to the coming catastrophe of the Great War. Isabel (or Isabella Graham as she’s called here) is visiting the girl’s mother. Both women watch the girl whom I named Eleanor.

In this draft, Isabella is the eye that sees this family. What intrigues me with this early attempt is the following observation, as Isabella watches the girl:

There was only disappointment ahead, that was the pity of it. Only the slow erosion of the girl’s desires.

And this is why I am intrigued: The final draft of the novel surprised me by its so obvious theme of disappointment, which had become a motif of the novel. For some reason, by the end of the many months of writing I had “forgotten” or not even realised that *disappointment* was the underlying current of the novel from the start. I am shocked to see my motives so clearly delineated from so early on. It is as if the novel itself remembered while the author was “forgetting”. I repeat the word *disappointment* a half-page later when Isabella is recorded as thinking that she wants to leave the little house out in the bush and ride alone in her sulkey “to feel the air hold her. She would reach home, that was the disappointment of it”. And so this character is set in aspic, as it were,

from the very start, a disappointed woman. Isabel[la] reveals more self-reflection on the same theme two pages later, when “it occurred to her how shockingly she had fallen. Her soul was so contorted now that she almost relished the deceptions she played, they played....She just couldn’t bear to touch him [her husband], that was all. Nor he her, it seemed”.

She is a minister’s wife. Her bedroom is her sanctuary (in the final novel, the sanctuary has moved downstairs to her private sitting room) where a “light which may have been close to the light of sleep, or of the arrival of birds as she woke in *her child days* [my emphasis], spilled over her”, an image which haunted the character even before the writing began.

Here is revealed the connection to Isabel[la]’s childhood memory of sensuous safety, which recurs in later drafts but in a much stronger and more ambivalent way. In later versions, this memory element becomes intrinsic to the working out of Isabel’s fate – in other words, the plot. In this early draft, such plot machinations were not conceived. To what extent was I being led so early on by blind luck towards a specific destination, as if there were a purpose greater than my own at work? Or, more rationally, does the writer take what is given and use it, even if the mechanism “feels” unconscious? Later I will take up this particular “memory”, a part of the jigsaw of Isabel’s character, because it attends to key areas of the analysis: the “back story” of a character and the use of such elements to further the plot in unexpected ways.

The draft then switches viewpoint to the “girl” now on horseback riding with her brothers’ lunch to their school. This scene came from a memory of the author’s, a replay of an anecdote from my grandmother which must have encased itself in an accessible place. Whether it was appropriate to the novel was questionable. At this early juncture not only was the position of lead character up for grabs, the plot itself had not found its narrow and truer path through the maze of memory and information which had accreted and was still accreting around the desire for the emergence of this new novel. Later, I dropped this scene.

In a following draft (wherein the Russian element had entered the mix and focused itself on one Russian character), the girl is once more riding into town

but without stopping to bring lunch to school. Isabel the observer is again happily located in a crucial position while a number of characters pass beneath her window. I noted:

They all process down the dusty street into town, while Isabelle [sic] is above them, hiding from the world behind her bedroom blind ...Here are most of the major characters caught in one scene together. Somewhere between them lies the stress of the conflict about to evolve in the novel.

I wanted to present an image of convergence here to mirror the projected scene at novel's end – “A hymn at the end sung in different keys by all characters”, as I noted in a scrappy kind of journaling. The final scene would be less inhabited by a number of *important* characters but fuelled by the same impulse.<sup>11</sup>

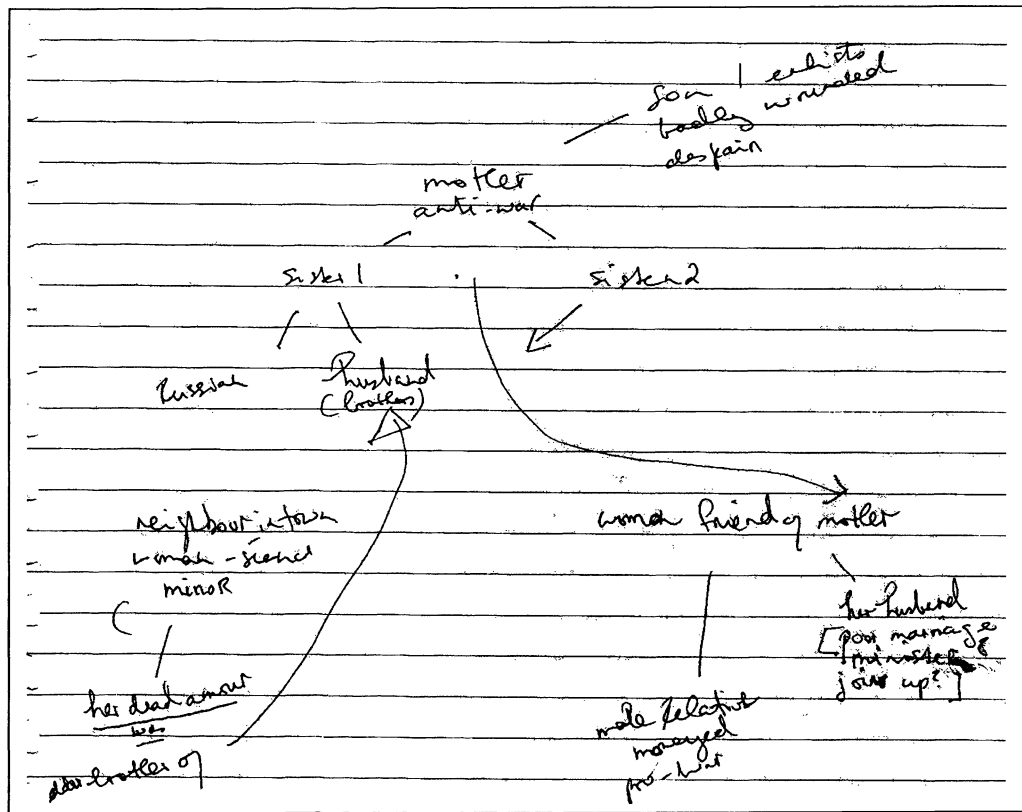
So at this point, the hazy outline of the novel encompassed a cast of characters of which no single one stepped forward as the particular focus of attention. Indeed, at this time I was calling the novel *Days of Men* from an epithet I wished to include from Psalms (103, 15-16) which reads: “The days of men are like the grass; he flourishes like a flower in the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more”. The use of the plural (“men”) here reminds me that I had not singled out a singular major character and did not intend to.

### Diagram

I drew a diagram to help me sort out who was what and how they related. Even so, the diagram itself is complicated. The confusion one might feel in following the “arrows” might in some way indicate my own confusion. In this diagram, the mother appears to be the pivotal character though not necessarily the most important or, should I say, most focused upon.

---

<sup>11</sup> See p. 254 above.



My early hand-drawn diagram of possible characters and their interaction. Note “woman friend of mother”, not in the centre, is the proto-type for Isabel Greene.

The character Isabelle of the early drafts is referred to as “woman friend of mother” who has a “male relative moneyed pro-war” – and this “male relative” character later became her female cousin Madeleine, a different type, who assumed a much bigger role in the novel than I had envisaged.

Also shown is a female character, “neighbour in town woman – séance minor”, later dropped, who to some extent was taken over by the subsequently developed Isabel. This dropped character had the flavour of a fey woman, linked in love to a dead soldier. The dead soldier appears in this diagram as the brother of elder sister’s “young husband” – an attempt to link stories.

Isabelle’s husband, who became Christopher, is here described as “her husband poor marriage minister? join up?”. Just who would enlist and how these enlistments would play in the story and deepen the ambiguities of each

character's motivations were bigger elements in my mind then than they later became.

The "Russian" in the diagram is attached by a dash to the elder, married sister. The family conflict was getting more complicated, where there was to be yet another love triangle. It's interesting that it is this elder sister (not the young girl on the summer plain at the beginning who seemed to be setting herself up for "something") who is involved in this triangle. She seems to have taken over from the younger as possible major character. According to this scenario, she has an affair with the Russian while her husband was fighting overseas. The young sister would remain in complicated relationship with her sister, because she would still love her elder sister's husband. It must have been all getting too much because this second triangle idea didn't last long. Indeed, much of the sub-plotting alluded to in the diagram disappeared as did a number of characters.

## II – Contamination

Two attempted characterisations of women – one discarded, the other partially discarded – became fodder for the growth of Isabel Greene. One of these was the fey “woman in town” of the diagram who was noted by me as:

woman who lives out lost love in a more real way after the death of loved one, goes to séances. Who is she? Minor character.

Pearl S. Buck's *Pavilion of Women* (1947) tells such a story. A married lady in China leaves her spousal duties at the age of 40, while she introduces her husband to a young courtesan to keep him company. The wife is deeply relieved. She takes to philosophic things and eventually a Roman Catholic priest comes to discuss such with her. On the priest's death, she falls profoundly in love with him and the rest of the novel is a love story. This book touched me. I think it more than probable that I was influenced by it here, though it was 25 years or more since I had read it. But nevertheless I gave my own storyline a more cynical colour. The fey lady in question was more hysterical than sincere, a perhaps cruel caricature of a certain type of unmarried woman. Additionally, her creation was coloured by my interpretation of the spiritualism which seemed fashionable during the period. Her clothing and the attempted Bohemianism of her life-style was a poor alter-ego attempt to inject some glamour into her otherwise sacrificial existence. Present at one of her séances is Isabel (sic) who observes the “Bohemian” character, Violette Cameron, as “an odd fish”. Isabel reflects that Violette had “discovered in herself the gift of communing with spirits” and since then, despite a previous “abject adherence to the forms”, “[i]t became apparent ... she'd hidden a certain leonine side of her nature”.

It's relevant to note there are two strong characters emerging in this scene, Violette and Isabel. The description of Isabel holds new information. The third person narration says of her:



[N]ot being afflicted by pride any more than the next person, she was prepared to admit there was more in heaven and earth than was dreamed of in her philosophy. She mentioned precisely this to her new maid, Katharine Heffernan ...

... Isabel Graham was also thirty seven years old. The dead was an abstract term to her, though clearly people she'd known in her youth were no longer living. The two pregnancies she had lost weren't the dead, no, they were occasional imaginings which had never realised. She was aware of her propensity for imaginings and this weakness embarrassed her; it made her whole being feel weak and overly vulnerable. She had long determined to attach herself to the everyday happening and to leave the fantastic to God and though she slipped sometimes she picked herself up and gave herself a good talking-to.

This scene shows Isabel's reaction to the character of Miss Cameron. Violette's weakness for romantic imaginings becomes Isabel's own subtle *bête-noire* in the final novel (though her imaginings are inspired more by jealousy), causing her to pull away from Lev. The scene also reveals the underlying poverty of certain women's lives during this war period, their existential loneliness. But additionally I have used the séance section to speak of the Isabel as revealed in this draft, giving her age, describing her house, something of her spirit. And Katherine Heffernan, the youngest daughter of the Irish mother, is shown as employed by Isabel. This relationship was engineered to allow for a closer relationship between the two women and a reason for travelling together up to Brisbane.

Violette Cameron's character is interesting also for the way she discloses secret parts of herself, specifically a "leonine" nature newly revealed and later a "recently imposing stature". Violette was a timid mouse and transforms into something with a roar. The coloured silks she now wears signifies this mutation. In later drafts, Isabel Graham/Greene transforms, too.

Why did I drop Violette? I think the most significant reason was that she took the edge off the developing character of Isabel. For me, this decision

highlights a “problem” I have not solved in the writing of novels. How I love the accumulation of characters, the peopling of places with all sorts, the colour and variety of temperaments, styles! Yet, the novel also requires refinements. Should one narrow down in order to intensify the themes? This is the central question, perhaps. Accordingly, in this novel I have narrowed down. Whether it was the right move or not, I still don’t know. And so, Violette bit the dust. To some extent, “she” also appears again in the guise of the later-developed Samuel Forsythe: “Mr Forsythe is the most Bohemian of men, a master of irony”.

### A Vital Element?

Something else of the Bohemian lady remained and this “something” perhaps reveals a vital element in how and why an author “chooses” character. Violette was a caricature, as I’ve said. I don’t particularly like to employ the use of caricatures, which is perhaps another reason for her demise. However, I did caricature and I think this expresses some deep disdain for her temperament and for her way of being in the “world”. In a later scene (set during a town meeting to discuss the upcoming second conscription referendum), her impact on the other characters is unequivocal:

Violette smiled at the onlookers in such a way as to express her enormous patience ... to acknowledge what others would titter about, the unnerving nagging of a rather difficult *mater*. Violette didn’t really understand that there was not one who didn’t pity her and more than a few women ... [were] repelled by her, despising in her what they despised in themselves. Violette was one of those born to wear the persona of the dreaded parts, the parts too shamefully unloved, too timidly unloved.

To the author also, Violette is a pathetic creature, a silly woman of a romantic inclination which tipped over into neurotic fantasy. Addicted to the serving of her tyrannical mother, she could only love from afar and, more spectacularly, love not only a man who had no discernible interest in her before

the war but who subsequently died before she could formulate the strength of her passion. She discovered the possibility of communing with the dead, which gifted her both a means to engage in her “love” and also a new romantic, fascinating personality – at least and specifically only when her mother wasn’t around. I was aware of this disdain of mine and of the unfair advantage I took with the poor woman. As her creator, I could make fun of her all I wanted. When Violette had to be disposed of for the reasons outlined, what was it that insisted on remaining?

Not the idea of loving the dead, which had become attractive to me in the middle period of preparation, linking the lives of women at home with the men at war, and which seemed at one point to be a possible theme. Not either the other details of her life, her spinsterhood, her domination by her mother, her inability to be real in whatever version of life she painted for herself. What remained in essence was the author’s *relationship* with the character, or at least something of it. Does this hint at why other characters in the novel diminished in importance and Mrs Greene rose to the surface? Mrs Greene seemed to evoke similar feelings in me – not precisely the same but similar.

My “feelings” for Mrs Greene were not obvious to me until I had finished the novel. Only then did I realise that I didn’t quite like her. Or shall I say that I had a certain disdain for her personality? For example, in early drafts the husband of Mrs Greene/Grahame was obviously the problematic part of their marriage. He was a withheld, bullying type of character and Isabel was clearly the passive, innocent party. By the time the final draft reached conclusion, Christopher Greene shows himself to be more worthy of compassion than his earlier incarnation and Isabel displays a narcissistic side to her nature which allows her to treat both men in her life with an unconscious cruelty at times.

Equally interesting to me is that my feelings for Violette and Isabel, even while not reaching my own awareness, seeped into Isabel’s feelings about herself. While she is capable of making a relationship with Lev (unlike Violette’s inabilities), her feelings about herself echo my feelings about Violette. In the eventual novel, a series of events is set in motion precisely because of Isabel’s sense of others’ disdain of her, her sense of lack of

importance. This justifies a strange action on her part – her springing away from Lev in the middle section of the novel – and it also allows her not to understand the effect her leaving would have on Lev. According to her judgement, Lev sees her in the same light as she sees herself. That he might not doesn't occur to her.

### The Rise of the Russians

The second female whose characteristics eventually “contaminated” Isabel Greene was Marina of the early drafts. The “Russian” of the diagram had somehow to make contact with the family members. Would he come to the town and if so, why? Step forward Yuri and Marina. Apparently this mechanical device had the unexpected outcome of shifting the focus and had repercussions on the precious desire to make the fictional family most emphatically the central concern of the novel. Perhaps in this new draft I was trying the shift out for size. I noted:

late May: Beginning again – starting with Russians in Australian town. Perhaps they will be the central cast? Now a couple – Yuri and Marina – who have moved to the border town. Is Marina going to be a major female character – she is homesick, getting older, frustrated with her new life, her marriage causing her frustration? Yuri is important from the first word. Will his story take over from the “guest”?

This notion introduced an element which, in retrospect, shot the gears and moved the unwieldy vehicle further on than I could see. For one thing, Marina seems to have created a spectre which did not leave the novel despite her disposal and part-replacement by Marina-the-more-minor-character who appears in the final novel. But there was more to it.

In this draft Marina is suffering from feelings of disappointment and a painful sense of her own humiliation. She is the wife of the Russian Yuri and they live in the railway town where the Irish family and the Grahames/Greenes

also live. Their friend, the Russian Petr – intended as a romantic lead and the catalyst of the action (though this draft only got as far as a couple of chapters and he didn't appear again before it “petered out”) – is visiting them.

Petr works his spell on Marina and all her personality seems to spin out for the evening. She remembers the times they all had together in Russia (placing them in context) and recalls the young, seductive woman she had been. She can't resist the temptation to return to that headiness. Drunk on the sexual electricity she feels and on vodka, she sharply experiences her present life in Australia as distasteful, prosaic compared to the poetry of love and revolutionary talk abundant in their previous incarnation. The language I've used becomes erotic. I also note that a number of elements of this scene reappear in later versions in very different guises:

They sat there now, on the verandah, Yuri and his wife Marina and their guest. Just behind Marina's dark head, a leafy branch of willow pushed in over the balustrade. She was flushed with the night's excitement and she laughed too loud as if she were thousands of miles and fifteen years away ... the samovar dimly lighting and fragrant with tea and the jam jars they used these days for celebratory drinks a-spark with candle light.

When Marina rose from her chair and sidled the narrow space between table and railing, both men's gaze followed her and she felt it. She bent over the gramophone, gingerly picked up the arm and blew on the needle, and with larger movements than they would have used wound the handle, round and round. The effort seemed to reduce her to a slight breathlessness. As she gently replaced the needle on the disc, the tinny sounds of an orchestra from another world whined up into gradual and spacious concordance. She stood straight, and listened. And the three of them, each waiting for this moment of right rhythm, dropped again the conscious anxieties of exile and tasted in their blood the heated air of damp-clothed gatherings, of riotous talk and spills of vodka, and an ageless combat with the gods.

... [Petr] leaned forward as Yuri went through the doorway. At one time it may have amused him, or perhaps even more than that, to play the

heady game for a while longer. Not now. The world was a colder place...  
[He said,] "I'll go in."

She nodded without looking at him. She ... laid her arm on the verandah railing. The night was very black and the stars, heat-hazed, seemed lost in their own substance, very far away. A longing for the sky of her childhood cut into her heart, very sharp.

What interests me is the rumble of disappointment. But the scene continues with a person from the town wandering by the house and changing the mood again. This person is the "cleric's wife", none other than a version of Isabel. She is apparently older here than in other drafts. She breaks Marina's *supposed* fantasy and the Russian woman suddenly and rudely experiences herself as lost to that magic world and is humiliated by the discovery.

Marina describes Isabel:

Marina liked this woman who was always wanting to be kind. She and Yuri had laughed sometimes, when they saw the unlikely husband and the woman together. They'd laughed and whispered things in the other's ear, and this innuendo had the effect of heating their own blood, if only for one brief second. Marina felt a little ashamed.

...And then the woman looked at the doorway, and stopped. Marina turned her head. He was there, the visitor, black against the candlelight....

"Good evening," he said.

"How do you do?" the woman said.

"You enjoyed the music," he said, a statement not a question.

"Yes. Yes, I did. It's so ... ah, unusual."

"Not very English," he said.

"I am not very English, either."

Marina watched them, the spectator. She did not know quite why the woman now raised her hand as if in parting and simply walked off without another word.

After a few moments, Petr asked her, in Russian, "Who was that?"

"She is a cleric's wife. Gracious, I would say, but distant."

"At least she speaks to us."

“Oh, yes. Gracious.” She felt irritated by the woman now. “Some of the elderly women here greet us in the street.”

“She is not elderly.”

“Not young,” she said. She reached across the pine table and picked up her husband’s glass and then Petr’s. She would have cried tears except that, even in the forgetfulness of drink, pride would not allow it. She had made fool enough of herself.

We have here a burgeoning of an idea, or more accurately of a character-study. Further, this excerpt displays a similarity with scenes from the final draft. The similarities are obvious to me now but “forgotten” until I examined it in this context. Take for instance: The dance scene at the Russian Club where the women drink vodka and it glistens on their lips, where the light catches glass; the erotic freedom of the Russian women as envisaged by Isabel; the gramophone which appears in the Russian Club and later becomes Christopher’s uncanny gift to his wife upon her return from these adventures.

In particular, I’d like to point out the scene in the final Chapter Three where Isabel and Madeleine are languorous on the verandah as they breakfast. It is the night after Isabel’s second but more significant meeting with Lev, the Russian, where she has been touched erotically. The elements common to both scenes are most apparent in the imagery, but also in the intangible factors of eroticism and in Marina’s/Isabel’s humiliating disappointment at the moment their *supposed* fantasy is broken by a *supposed* reality. I use the stressed word purposefully – the final Isabel “supposes” fantasy when in fact her propensity to so name her desires is a cause of confusion in other characters’ lives. This element has become an important component in the development of her full characterisation and of the plot which develops around her. Compare Chapter Three in *The Russian and Mrs Greene*:

Through the slits of my eyes, I see a mist of mid-morning light glint among rubbery leaves. There’s a thoroughly green interlock of them up massed up behind the white balustrades of the verandah, pushing against

the posts, fingering through the trellis work. Madeleine's garden is  
aswamp with leaf, under daily threat from torrid growth.

But it's Madeleine who emulates Marina in her gesture of laying her hand along  
the balustrade though I treat it very differently, with irony and even comedy:

[Madeleine] drags her chair across to the edge of the verandah,  
deliberately drags the feet scraping along the floorboards and sits as if  
she's exhausted from the effort, drapes her hand over the railing, turns the  
palm consumptively up . . . .

"You were in late," she says.

The scenes' endings in both drafts also ring uncannily similar in that Marina  
(early draft) and Isabel (later draft) come to conclude they have been foolish in  
their erotic imaginings:

Sitting on my bed, away from Madeleine's prying eyes, the full impact of  
this letter can be received. I bend my head down to my knees, breathless,  
and bury my forehead there out of pure humiliation. The stiff formality of  
it! The bemusement, the cocked eyebrow at my antics last night. . . . He  
must think me such a fool.

The language in both scenes is just as significant as the repeated actions.  
The shared imagery of verandah, heat, leafery, balustrade, languidity is highly  
significant and I will explore this more fully later but let me emphasise the  
"forgottenness" of this process; I did not deliberately "copy" the earlier draft's  
imagery.

One more significant legacy was left from this trial focus on Marina and  
Yuri and their friend Petr/Lev. The novel has turned toward the Russians.



### III – Isabel’s Inner Life

Bored and angry with Isobel [note spelling]. Can’t see her expanding. Can’t see her truthfully getting into relationship with any other character. Seems to be in wrong marriage? Should he be minister, or is this too much platitide?

Yet, don’t want to do any other character either.

All other characters seem false and stick-like.

Irish mother is the cook in minister’s house now, not the youngest Irish daughter.

The Irish household is now already in town, not out in the bush.

- (My own notes)

My note clearly shows that the penny is beginning to drop, but even so Isabel does not fall easily into my hand. Plot is leading me as I wrangle with the historical narrative, planning characters around events. In my growing awareness that I needed to narrow the focus, I decided to put the Irish family in town where other characters could more easily interact and where they’d be at hand for events.

There was an unexpected fall-out from this decision. In swerving from the first impulse of that opening scene on the hot plain, I’ve swerved from the immediate connection with the family.

#### Isabel versus the Sisters

Scholes and Kellogg (1968, p.71) state the “most essential element in characterisation is ... inward life”. As drafts were tried and discarded, Isabel’s inner life begins to show, initially through contrast with her outer life.

She was seen by other characters as one thing and yet we see her as another.

She appears in a certain light with the Irish family and in another when at home with her husband, for instance.

Isabel Graham was a snob. This was a fact beyond thought or any further possibility. It didn't stop the Heffernan offspring from greeting her courteously or even making her a cup of tea at their mother's behest. She couldn't help being one, after all. She was a Protestant solicitor's wife, a man high up in his own church and they had a bit of money, must have got it from somewhere. What that meant, must have got it from somewhere, puzzled the younger of the two Heffernan sisters, for she wondered about things. Things said by others and not explained tended to set up quiet tremors inside her and certain hints of darkness flashed from places previously unvisited. [In the later drafts, Isabel introduces the judgment of snobbishness herself, claiming in the final one: "I don't think I am a snob."]

This passage opened a chapter in yet another draft where I had given the elder sister a job in Brisbane, hoping to pull the strings through her. Her role there may have given her major character status in the novel. She returns with news of a trade union demonstration gone wrong.<sup>12</sup> She tells the story to her mother and younger sister, and Isabel is also present. Yet I have presented the story through the *younger* sister's perception:

People were supposed to be fair. If you were in the right then you shouldn't get hit on the head with a big stick, and old ladies shouldn't be pushed to the ground by policemen on big horses. And they *were* in the right.

The younger sister's interior life is also available to us. Indeed, that "certain hints of darkness flashed from places previously unvisited" suggests and indeed, from the author's point of view, positively promises a narrative investigating the future of this young girl and the "places" which might be visited. But, could it be that Isabel's edge over the girl comes about because of the *division* between her inner and outer lives?

Something else of importance is going on in this scene. Isabel seems to empathise with the girl, as in the following:

---

<sup>12</sup> See Pam Young 1991 for description of Black Friday.

It was Isabel Graham who noticed the alarm in the younger girl's face, the blanching of her skin. The girl was prone to blanching, and this had been a cause of worry to her mother. She's too sensitive about things, Mrs Heffernan had said to her one day, she'll just have to toughen up. Isabel had uttered some inane words in the girl's defence.

In previous drafts the same dynamism is apparent, presenting Isabel taking on the part of observer. But more cogently she is in *empathy* with the girl. I see now what is happening. There is a reluctance to surrender my original story focusing on the family. That the spotlight would shift so strongly on to an outsider was too far a stretch for me at this point. I wonder to what extent my "disdain" for Isabel was born with this sense that she was the usurper?

What I seem to be doing, unwittingly, is attempting a compromise by merging the two women, Isabel and the younger girl, on the level of consciousness.

#### IV – Enter the Older Woman

About this time I felt a need to bring something of an older woman's bird's-eye view on the young sisters' romantic catastrophes.

I decided to introduce a flashback Prologue. I have already discussed the nature of the conflict – a triangular romantic dilemma concerning the two sisters and the elder's husband. A first-person older woman's voice would describe a late attempt at reconciliation, the guilty sister hoping to make peace with the innocent. The novel would tell the story of "what had happened". The voice of this flashback proved unsatisfying and failed to have any emotional grip.

My second try at a flashback seems now to be much more interesting. Also set many years later but told in the voice of an unidentified old lady, this flashback succeeds in the context marginally more than the first. Through imagery, it touches on central concerns later to be exhibited in the novel. The prime difficulty for me was a matter of timing. How old was this woman "now" if she had been a certain age in 1919? If the voice came from the younger of the sisters, she could justifiably recount the story in the 1980s at best. Around this time, Mrs Greene was moving forward as a possible choice for the major character or, if not that, then at least narrator. If the voice of the flashback belonged to her, she could not be alive in our present day.

I hoped the owner of the voice would come out from behind the curtain and reveal herself to me as the draft progressed but this was not the case. In fact until I knew *whom* I was dealing with I could not properly progress the plot. However, I did feel the voice was beginning to ring true. When I surrendered to my doubts and deleted this attempt, I did so with trepidation, as my notes show, and a fear that I might be losing something:

[deleted Sept 18 2006] – does this [the section deleted] ... [g]ive a

voice for the entire novel, a point of view? Though is it Katharine (as I presume) or is it Isabel (not possible at the year I've chosen)? It does allow me an 'in' to the rest of the novel, and a tone.

The texture of the deleted flashback seems to have caught something to which I returned right at the very end of the final draft, though in a more integrated way. The original reads:

Peace is simple, once it comes. What's lost remains lost and nothing is restored, and the days of desperate prayer that such and such must happen or one would die are over and faintly foolish, considering the outcome.

I woke from a dream early this morning. It happens rarely yet one does still dream of love, of kisses had and not had. And I came to with almost the taste of a mouth on mine, the smell of foreign and beloved flesh, the touch of breath on the down above my lips. The sunlight was already strong, the air warm. I must have turned my head on my pillow towards the sun, and I spent some dazzled moments in the appropriate place for me now, not quite here, not quite there. There are finer things to be than what I turned out to be, I'm sure.

I never thought I would end up where I am, in a degree of comfort, quite serene, rather amused ... I gaze through a large window into my own lushly green garden – a low-key affair as it's a city garden but profoundly satisfying to the senses and to the most important sense, memory, where somehow or other this garden, this lush greenness, has resided all my life and comes originally from God knows where, for I surely don't.

... I may go out and head those browned gardenias. As it is, bruised petals litter the grass beneath the bush. Everything today reminds me of something else, though I can't remember what. I feel like child with a sparkler on cracker night, it shimmering in the darkness till it sputters out and then a nearby grown-up hands me another, ablaze. Only the sparklers are inside me these days. Who would have thought I'd come to this?

When I compare this opening with the Epilogue from the eventual novel, I am taken by surprise at common elements, not least of which is the imagery of the

garden. I had a strong “feeling” of the garden in the flash-back scene and somehow it stayed with me over the next couple of years as I wrote.

Yet I had forgotten all about this “feeling of the garden” as I drafted the letter that closes the final novel. The imagery shared between the flashback scene and the Isabel of the final novel proves to me, if nothing does, that “something” was drawing me to this voice despite not being entirely clear whose it was. Imagery had already begun its construction of the character, though it took me a while to catch up with it.

One further point about this flashback needs to be made. The voice is not the voice of Isabel Greene. It is the voice of a subtle woman, more intelligent perhaps than Isabel, more conscious. It is closer to the voice of Lilian in my novel, *The Italian Romance*. Isabel as such had not yet been formed.

## V – The Novel Begins

I began with an image of paradise. The early years of the “story” – that is pre-War and early-War – would have set up the idyll which the young people enjoyed before the cataclysm. I had vaguely seen the sisters and brothers, their friends and their romances, their days in the sunshine of the bush as a “first half” of the novel. All this would echo Australia’s innocence and its shattering. Somewhere during the months following my discarding of both flashback preambles, I wrote this opening to a draft:

The whole world had changed utterly when it went to war. It had been beautiful before and the sun had always shone and no one’s heart was broken; the young people danced and made eyes at each other, and there were Sunday picnics where even mortality itself was a dream and everyone lay in the long grass and light soaked through the fragile skin of their closed eyelids till all they saw was endless and effortless. The war had changed that, and now the end of the war came and everything changed again. But it wasn’t like before.

I noted in May 2006: “This ... now replaces the first half of the planned book. All of paradise lost motif<sup>13</sup> and the young people’s view of life pre-war. Last line states change of perception, not just of state of world”.

This excerpt, too, was quickly abandoned. The motif of innocence lost, and all that it symbolised, seemed to disappear completely. Research and reflection had caused the Brisbane Bolsheviks and the Red Flag Riots to elbow out other rival historical elements. The exception was the Spanish ‘Flu epidemic which remained. Perhaps my insistence on the epidemic was my inability to entirely lose the initial anecdote, which was the critical entrance to the novel’s genesis. But the drafting and re-drafting increasingly has led me away from the dim vision I had at the beginning.

---

<sup>13</sup> See my later chapter on imagery, *Metaphor of the Garden*, for explication of Paradise motif here.

## Isabel, at last

This new direction, however, has a bonus. Magically, I find I am ready to begin the novel proper with its emphasis on character. It opens in 1918, a few months before the end of the war. It seemed to me that a kind of integrity or perhaps neatness required a tighter time-scale. The plot has focused itself. And we come to Isabel, at last.

Another note I made in May '06 (a busy month) makes this revealing statement:

Now as Isobel [sic] comes to the Irish household, she comes centre again – her inner life begins to show. Also Pat the returned soldier is met.

The time scale of the entire novel has changed. It is now at end war, rather than before. Therefore the paradise lost motif has gone.

It seems better now to focus on a smaller scale. Thinking now of P[enelope] Fitzgerald, and her intense focus eg in *Gate of Angels*<sup>14</sup>.

Mary [earlier Eleanor, later Katherine] the daughter is revealed quickly, and vis a vis Isobel. Are they two sides of the one coin?

Somewhere along the line, Isabel has made her pitch and seems to be winning. I can see now, of course, that indications were there from the start. The empathic connection between Isabel Greene and the young girl seems to have led to a reversal of dominance. This empathy continued on through to the final version and was used to throw further light on Isabel's character. Her feelings for and about Katherine Martin (even when they are wrong) say more about Isabel than anyone else. This is probably the case in "real" life too, I would venture to say. The observer therefore becomes of interest in herself.

Her age was of significance, too, and probably highly significant. I seemed increasingly to need a more experienced voice than Katherine's, for instance. Replacing the youthful idyll with an already disillusioned maturity seems to have suited the tone I began to pitch. This tone resonated more properly with

---

<sup>14</sup> I refer here to Penelope Fitzgerald's (2004) novel of the immediate pre-Great War, *The Gate of Angels*.



the author during the period of the writing of this novel. Additionally, to make the love story more meaty I needed two people of similar age (for Lev would have to be in his thirties to make his back story credible) who would come to each other in a less innocent way than a young girl and older man. In 1918, this is appropriate. People are bruised, perhaps even desperate. Isabel's desperation floods out from her and breaks her natural reserve. She is passionate, one might say, rather than romantic. She fits.

By autumn of 2007, I could report:

And so she is now Mrs Greene, major character. Coming to this new appreciation of her ... meant that I could, if I so chose, move into the first person. I decided to leave the Prologue concerning the Russian in Shanghai in the third person<sup>15</sup>. But Chapter One went immediately into the first person. Mrs Greene now tells the story.

The struggle in all this cannot be overstated. The shift in plot, the lengthy research and even a sacrifice of a certain *tendresse* for much of my own childhood stories were nowhere as torturous and tortuous as the search for and the establishment of Isabel Greene, narrator and lead character. Her name, and the spelling of her personal name, has been decided on, too.

---

<sup>15</sup> The Prologue set in Shanghai was subsequently dropped.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DISSECTING ISABEL

I am left still wondering how Isabel was chosen. It seems to have happened without a moment of decision. I noted (in a woolly way):

As attempts at opening the story up ... fell one under the next, surprisingly the “Methodist Minister’s wife” [the model] became more significant. Her temperament became of some interest to me, and eventually her age ... her “religious” background, her marriage which almost immediately presented itself as impoverished, her isolation (unlike the Irish woman whose family gave her all the passion and drama she needed to fill her life at that time), drew me to question her place in the novel as a whole. This question meant weighing the two characters, the girl’s and the woman’s. And this weighing process took more than a year ... Not having a focal point, a voice, a prism through which all the novel is seen, a character who would become the fulcrum for the events, who would significantly tip the story from one point to another proved to not only make [some early drafts] “bitty” but also affected the language. The voice allows the language. Not knowing “who is speaking” in this broad sense in which I mean the phrase results in a stuttering of language and does not allow a natural rhythm, a normal flow of “ordinary” to “poetic” which, for me, echoes the semi-consciousness of most people.

As writer, I experience that it was Isabel who “stepped forward”. I think it’s now clear I did not coolly make certain calculations after which I “decided” on her as both cipher and centre of the story. Nevertheless let us try to be more exact, to look at what actually happened.

These points become clear. Early drafts show that Isabel from the very start was observing the action. She was seen as being a certain type and yet at home her experience was quite different. She was also revealing her inner life. Even

in the midst of the discarded scenes, she kept thrusting the theme of disappointment forward. It took some time to decipher the meaning of these pointers, obvious though they are in retrospect. She was already subsuming into herself the vital essences of lead character even in scenes such as “Marina and Yuri’s” where she appears as a pathetic passer-by. Something about her seemed to adhere to the novel’s core.

### Disappointment

Two notes I wrote quite early on as I struggled with the novel’s character “problem” throw a significant idea. The first is this :

Person (M. or F.?) enduring pain of empty universe. Person of faith, “knocking on heaven’s door”. Deeper approach to true despair and atheism than non-believer. A married woman? Her husband goes to war (?), after difficulties in marriage?

I entered the second note a little later, bringing up the possibility of a subsequently discarded love affair:

Something about persuasion, the seduction of an idea, suggested to me that this character [“Person of faith”] would be a man. I set his back-story according to Evans’ research, and so he came down from Russia through China just after the failed rebellion of 1905, caught a boat from Shanghai and landed up in Brisbane. I then had to find a way to link him personally to the family. Would there be a romance between him and the major character, the daughter of the family?

These notes indicate clearly the tussle I was having with the shadowy outline of this “person of faith” character, who may even have been male. That I played with the idea of gender is of interest to me because the “faith” idea is linked to the real person, the Methodist minister’s wife who befriended my great

grandmother. In the final versions of the novel “the Russian” and Isabel emerge as the main players, each shadowing the other in loss of faith.

At the start I had presented Mrs Greene as the wife of a clergyman, following her “model” from real life. Through the drafts, her husband became a solicitor and then a vague kind of businessman. But importantly he retained his attachment to the “Church”, an attachment relevant to his wife’s crisis. As Isabel took shape in my initial imaginings, I saw the opportunity to show in her a sense of loss of faith. The war had dragged out and cost many millions of lives. Surely certainties were tested? Death of the young was becoming commonplace, turning the inevitable rightness of things on its head. Where better to place this inner questioning than in a religious context, where ultimate faith resides?

Milan Kundera proposes that thematic unity guarantees a novel’s coherence (2005, p. 82). And what of the coherence of a character? Does a lead character have “thematic unity”? I would suggest that it does. Isabel’s theme, one might say, is disappointment. I’ve shown how disappointment has been a part of the fabric of this novel from the very start. Isabel does not let Disappointment down. Her theme and the novel’s coincide – but I don’t contend that other characters could not have achieved this unity, particularly Katherine or the Irish mother or Marina (early version).

Isabel has another, related value. Her intimate relationship with Lev allows a peculiar access to his personal disappointment. And his disappointment connects the novel directly with the political defeat of Lev’s cause.

At this point, this author intrudes to admit conscious interference. Just as writers have the tendency to get up and make a pot of coffee, sit down afterwards and write “Mary poured the coffee”, so also they tend to thrust a deep disposition of the moment into the work. The wave of faith and despair, of fullness and void plunges through every life and I recall a particularly acute and silent bout of Void as I started the novel. It is also very relevant that as I started, the Second Iraq War was in swing and souring. I had already turned my back on the ignorance behind my youthful pacifism during the Vietnam era, and now was particularly sickened by the hate-filled rhetoric of the current crop of

pacifists. And yet war seemed to bring only war. Where does one stand? There seemed no ideology, no “wing” worth its salt. This is where Mrs Greene’s inner currency of hope and disappointment, romantically, religiously and socio/politically had its genesis.

The emerging character of Mrs Greene was slowly taking on a part of the author’s troubled and quite specific consciousness. From the author’s point of view, there is a sense of relief and something close to pleasure when a deep movement of the “soul” or some strong and genuine emotion leaps out and crosses over to the burgeoning work. When this happens, it feels to the writer that the novel will be more than the sketch of a plot.

Mendilow (1967, p. 255) might be stretching the point to suggest that “[t]he work of every novelist ... is explicitly or implicitly a social commentary on the time in which it is written”, but as a writer is necessarily informed by her own present, she will almost inevitably see the world of her creation in that light. My novel certainly expresses this instinct. By her “loss of faith” motif, Isabel is the bridge between the historical setting of the novel and today. She is not just I, but We.

South African theologian and anti-apartheid activist Albert Nolan (2006, pp. 4-5) states that this “is an age of unprecedented scepticism”. He goes on to delineate that as “modernity’s house of cards began to collapse”, post-modernism responded to the implosion of the Soviet bloc as well as the explosion of such absolute ideologies as Nazism and Fascism. It continues to respond to the fact that we “[are left with] one superpower that now seems to be hell-bent on war to wipe out terrorism while it ignores the ecological destruction of the earth”. Additionally, Nolan refers to the loss of faith in religious dogma and doctrine. In essence this scepticism is the landscape of Isabel’s inner world and finally of Lev’s, Norah’s, Pat’s, Stephen’s and to some extent other characters’.

But I’ve just suggested a number of other characters could have carried the theme. Perhaps one of them might have told this story?

## Inevitability

[Claude Mauriac] said that the specific characters he had used in his novels were not indispensable to the particular novels in which they appeared, another set of personages would have done just as well ....The statement is obviously too simple ... The affirmation stands, however, as a reaction against the artist's tendency, especially since the advent of Romanticism, to emphasise the individual and unique aspects of personality ... Gradually, writers have been expressing an increased number of doubts over the reality of images as conveyed to us by our senses – and these doubts have had important effects on the concept of characters as well as personality. (Roudiez 1962, p. 553)

Is it the very difficulty of the search outlined earlier which makes me doubt Isabel's inevitability? Indeed, Isabel may even have limited the scope. Her character's lack of engagement, the poverty of her political understanding, the good fortune which resulted in her not being touched into any acute awareness by personal injustice – all these prohibited a broad focus. She does not speak "for" the class I first intended the novel to explore. Nor is she so well off or unfeeling that she is "the enemy". She is not a victim, nor a hero. She does not hunger or thirst for justice. Her passion is erotic and because of this the novel has become something other than the one I first imagined I would write. She was the "rub" of class conflict. She may be a counterpoint but in using her have I failed to fully develop my second intention of fashioning a "society [where] all was not perfect"?

## Ironic Gap

Isabel's "wrongness" may not be all that bad. Scholes and Kellogg (1968, p. 256) suggest that "to the extent that the narrating character is differentiated from the author one ironic gap opens up, and to the extent that the narrating character is differentiated from himself as participant in events another ironic gap appears."

In Penelope Fitzgerald's novels *The Gate of Angels* and particularly *The Beginning of Spring*, the use of irony has the effect of creating in the reader both a delight in "knowing more" than the characters and a powerful, affective reaction of sadness and foreboding. Both novels are set just prior to World War One, the first in Britain, the second in Russia. Both end on a note of hope. *The Gate of Angels* takes a transcendent view, though the coming slaughter is described only in her language and not in any foreboding on the part of major characters. *The Beginning of Spring* takes an even sharper ironical stance, even from the choice of the title. We, the reader, know that the Great War and the Russian Revolution will follow on the heels of the moment-in-time of the novel's plot but the resolutions put forward do not represent any character's awareness of what lies ahead. I re-read both these novels as I was beginning my reflection-before-writing of *The Russian and Mrs Greene*.

Constructing a character may include the allowance for an ironic gap to open up. My "eye witness" (Scholes and Kellogg 1968, p. 256) to historical events is Isabel Greene. She was not an obvious candidate for the job but as Fitzgerald has shown, and successfully to my mind, a political awareness in a character is not necessary in telling a tale about political events. I've already pointed to *Property*, Valerie Martin's small masterpiece, which works a particularly biting use of this gap. In my novel, Isabel Greene believes herself to be "not a snob" yet reveals herself to be such in, for example, her failure to offer the shop-girl Katherine Martin the guest room for an overnight stay but instead puts her in the sleep-out. In this way, she serves the purpose of a scoring a political point which is the obverse of her own perception. While Mrs Greene does progress to some clearer acknowledgment and therefore I would state that my novel is not ironic<sup>16</sup> in any classic sense, the earlier chapters allow for the procedure described by Shroder (1967, p. 24), where "the ironic author, *appears* to allow his characters to magnify themselves, but is in reality subtly and silently reducing them to their actual stature".

---

<sup>16</sup> I am bearing well in mind here Booth's point that irony "has so many different meanings" (1991, p. 372 *fn*) and so what I've called the "classic" ironic novel is to say one that sustains that voice throughout. My epilogue "cheats" a bit, perhaps – though see later for more on this.

Isabel does seem to satisfy Scholes' and Kellogg's contention (1968, p. 277) that a "narrator who is not in some way suspect, who is not in some way subject to ironic scrutiny is what the modern temper finds least bearable". She gains Brownie points, according to this criterion, because her very inadequacy puts her into a "relativized" position with both the realities of her environment and with readers of the novel.

The argument behind all this has a long history. Nussbaum (1986, p. 242) shows that Plato's position (and of those before him such as Parmenides) was this: "[t]he perfect god's-eye standpoint is the only reliable one from which to make adequate and reliable true judgments". Coming immediately after him, Aristotle "has defended the view that the internal truth, truth *in* the appearances, is all we have to deal with; anything that purports to be more is actually less, or nothing" (Nussbaum 1986, p. 292). It seems to me that this philosophic foundation is the same basis for the continuing disagreements about literary characterisation in general and "ironic gap" in particular. To solve the dilemma is to reach Nirvana.

### Isabel's Limitations

In the meantime, the limitations of ciphering the bulk of the story through Isabel Greene's eye present problems. When Leaksa (1996, pp. 163-4) uses words such as "relinquishes" and "surrenders" with regard to the novel's evolution toward direct presentation, he rightly expresses the process and points to the limitations such a process entails. In an historical novel such as this, and about events which are little known<sup>17</sup>, faithfulness to Isabel Greene's point of view requires the writer to presume a great deal about the reader. In this regard, the novelist must question herself about the intensity of burden she can place on their shoulders. The success or failure of a novel may depend on it.

The "cheat" of an Author's Note and the wrap-around of a Prologue/Epilogue seemed to me the best way to counter-balance the lacks that Isabel's narration inevitably contain. Having boxed myself in with the first

---

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Kenneally has very recently published on these events.



person view, and when contortions and manipulations used elsewhere were impossible, I had to fall outside the unity of the central character's voice to express certain historical realities. The Author's Note stands alone, alluding to the Great War, the subsequent influenza pandemic and some historical shifts allowed into being by the upheaval of this war. But Lev's ultimate (fictional) fate presents a trickier problem in that I had to incorporate it into the text itself.

In the Moscow Prologue, Lev brings to mind his time in Australia and his romance with Mrs Greene. The bulk of the novel is the telling of their story, yet it is not Lev but Isabel who tells it. Perhaps the text is pointing to some kind of union between the two characters which would allow Isabel to step in and take up the narration, almost as if she's with him on that night when he was arrested. In the Epilogue, Lev says of Isabel, "She would be whispering in my ear."

Nevertheless, the inability of Isabel's first person narrative to de-fog the material without these intrusions is a clear limitation in my choice of lead character and first person narrative.

At the same time, I would say that Isabel's character fulfils an important function by this very inability and that the *themes* of the novel are not compromised by this "failure". That she either does not know or cannot explain within the limits of the narrative that certain events are happening is a characteristic of her isolation from the passionate ideas which surround her. In this way, she fulfils more closely her role as *We*, the Present.

Scholes and Kellogg (1968, p. 259) comment, with a certain amount of humour, on the determination of the novelist to persist in the eye-witness novel for all its inherent limitations, and they make the point that this "illustrates as well as anything the nature of the compromise between empiricism and fiction on which the uneasy edifice of the novel has been reared". I have already commented on Valerie Martin's *Property*, written from the perspective of a Southern slave-owner's wife, which explores the wife's emotional response to her husband's mistress – her own personal (slave) maid. She is determined to have this girl "rightfully" restored to her. *Property* says more to me about the fallacy of slavery than any number of studies. The themes of Martin's novel arise even more strongly, I suggest, because of the constrictions of her chosen

technique. Her novel was of some influence as I wrote *The Russian and Mrs Greene*. Isabel and I further take heart from Booth's contention that:

No character in *Tom Jones*, no character in *Bleak House*, *the Scarlet Letter*, or *War and Peace*, knows enough about the meaning of the whole to go beyond his personal problems to any general view. Since the same is true of almost all modern works, and since reliable narration is often not allowed, the task of generalization may be left entirely to the reader.

(Booth 1991, p. 198)

The reader, therefore, may see that Isabel Greene does indeed attend to my stated intention of looking at class. She perhaps widens the scope, even. Through her own "ignorance", she betrays her class-consciousness even while refuting it and this in turn keeps the spotlight on the issue. As she travels from her own strata to a lesser – the Martin family – and back again, she also illustrates the breakdown of rigidity in the class system occurring at that time not only in Australia but worldwide.

In my Author's Note, I have synthesised the massive changes being brought on by the Great War. A less stratified society was another of them. Isabel was in a position to move relatively seamlessly through the classes and this included upwards into Madeleine's stratosphere, where she views for the reader another cog in the wheel of the established system. As a by-product of the cousins' relationship, the novel also addresses the breaking-through of that system by women in general.

As for whether Isabel Greene successfully delivers my third intention, that of investigating the "religious" heart of a particular political position, I doubt she does that adequately. The family was the original choice for that delivery and probably is still the better option. I can't see how Isabel illuminates that "heart" to any real extent. Norah Martin discloses it to her, and Paddy does reveal the conflict between the labour position and the Bolsheviks – Isabel is the witness to these. She "feels" for Norah and her life situation but not even her belated understanding of her identification with the Irish woman addresses the issue I had intended.

However, through her narration and her convenient appearance in key locations she is more successful in managing to relate the “story” of the Red Flag Riots. Perhaps this is more manipulation than any “natural” movement. I realised at the very start of the Red Flag intrusion into the fabric of the novel that *any* character who fulfilled the role of witness to these events would have to be manipulated into place. Isabel’s lack of faith motif and her insights into her lover, Lev, give what might be called a witness to the “meaning” of these events and their later consequence. In that sense, another character might not have done the trick.

### Isabel’s Desire

Isabel’s story focuses on her erotic desire. Disappointment implies its origin in desire and I’ve said that Isabel, as deliverer of the first person narrative, incorporates the theme of disappointment into the trajectory of her character’s experiencing of “what happens”.

Isabel Greene *is* the story – being not only narrator but lead character in the tale. The politico-social concerns addressed by *The Russian and Mrs Greene* follow the same trajectory as her own. For Lev, the desire for change and the subsequent historical manifestation of that change are followed by betrayal of the Bolshevik experiment. For Norah Martin and her class, the normal hopes of betterment lived out through the children seem to be dashed at the end of the novel, and Norah’s last words reveal frankly the inner state of disappointment which curdles her life – “I thought it would be different, didn’t you?” In this allegorical sense, Isabel is not a closed-off entity and the novel as a whole is not focused on the inner workings of an individual. In a sense, Isabel is a tool used to play out in symbolic gestures the desire/disappointment dichotomy of social experiment over the past century.

One of these social experimenters described as invaluable “[the human personality’s] basic trait of continual discontent” (Trotsky 1923). Trotsky celebrates this basic trait which seems to provide the impetus for the human personality to “grow and become polished at all its points”. Perhaps he sees this

growth as a pre-requisite to his hope that “individuality” and “collective interests” would co-exist in a socialist society. Trotsky’s “discontent” is surely another way of describing the binary nature of Desire/Disappointment.

Mark Patrick Hederman (2000, p. 17) states that desire “defines me as a human being. It is something that each one of us can recognize all too easily as the fundamental flaw lurking in the background of our lives... Desire is the dimension of time and space... It is the sadness of change. It seeks rest. It seeks the abolition of time and space”.

Like Trotsky, Benedictine Abbot Hederman also celebrates the trait but for different reasons. The timeless is not possible for us, yet we continually place it in objects. He follows Aristotle who points out that desire’s nature is to be without limits and that much of our lives are attempts to satisfy this infinite lack (Hederman 2000, p. 29). He looks at Solzhenitsyn’s *First Circle* where a prisoner is described like this:

For the present she wanted to shut everything out of her mind except Gleb. She would think of that timeless entity which was made up not just of him and of her, but of the two of them together, and which we usually call by that overworked word ‘love’. (Hederman 2000, p. 29)

In response, Hederman states that the “object of our love is always a distortion” (p. 25). Yet further on (p.40), he admits that “infinite horizons” are available to us “within our limitations”. These horizons are “available to us as lovers”. He admits Miranda into the awakened when Shakespeare has her say, “How beauteous mankind is. O brave new world, that has such people in’t”.

Isabel Greene, in her last letter to Lev, refers to that timeless entity, or eternity, when she refers to them dancing together at a wedding – “we would dance and dance [ ]”. The missing full-stop (conveniently caused by the icy wind whipping away any further pages) is the indicator of this eternity.

### Isabel's Desire as a Failure?

Isabel's personal desire, apparently, has brought the novel a long way from its original motivations: to reconstitute a family from a series of anecdote enlivened by invention (a kind of praise-poem, perhaps) and to have a look at a certain type of politics, Australian labour (particularly with an Irish small-'r' republican twist) and how individual families conceived of it and why they adhered to it much as to a religion. Isabel's desire nature does not seem to have much to do with these worthy aims.

Scholes and Kellogg's (1968, p. 181) summation that "[t]he inner life of the female of the species contemplating her erotic situation has been a focal point of narrative concern with the psyche from Medea and Dido to Anna Karenina and Molly Bloom" perturbs me, placing as it does a burden of responsibility for psychic exploration of the erotic on women characters. Scholes and Kellogg go on to remark that male characters, while equally victims of the same "arrows of love", simply "translate their urges into action". I've shown Wilson describing the Ovidian strategy where character is split by "a double awareness of two conflicting values". Interestingly he points out that this strategy is used throughout the *Metamorphosis* but "only in the case of female characters is the conflict internalised" (Wilson 1980, pp.126-7 *fn*).

As a woman novelist, while admitting a certain recognition of my own female characters' propensities, I confess to an unease with this categorisation. If this unease reveals that I have ingested a patriarchal judgement and now accuse others of that very judgement, I am at fault. But it is not my intention to psychoanalyse either myself or Isabel, and I will leave it to others to speak of the differentiation between classical male and female characters. *The Russian and Mrs Greene* probably could be classed as a story of a woman "contemplating her erotic situation" rather than the more robust narrative of a political series of events which it might have been in other hands (or in my own

in a different mood), and the verdict comes from myself that I have let the novel down. It is for others to agree or disagree.<sup>18</sup>

Isabel's desire raises yet another possible criticism of her "character". Aristotle seemed to make very obvious points when he was sorting out the world (not so obvious, of course). One of his major stepping stones was posing this question: "What imparts movement?" and proposing this answer: "Desire – desire is the causal factor" (Nussbaum 1986, p. 281). Desire in this sense has broad significance.

Nussbaum (1986, pp. 1-2) begins her study of "goodness" with Pindar: "But human excellence grows like a vine tree, fed by the green dew, raised up, among wise men and just, to the liquid sky". She makes the startling point that this image "suggests that part of the peculiar beauty of *human* excellence just is its vulnerability". I understand Aristotle's "desire" to be indicative of the needy nature of the human species. Unlike a rock, humans (and other animals) move because they are reaching out to fulfil certain needs. However, unlike an amoeba (as far as we know), humans have an ethical component within their "neediness".

### Does Isabel 'Decide'?

To what extent Isabel fulfils the Aristotelian criterion, echoed by Walter Benjamin, that a character is not just a "personage" but a decider is now relevant.

Leacock (2002, pp. 281-3) cites Benjamin's crucial distinction between choice and decision: "...choice belongs to a natural-mythical realm of twilight ambiguities, a realm of sacrifice without redemption. Decision, in contrast, brings clarity in an ethical realm determined by the possibility of transcendence". Even more, if the personage, "does not reveal her decisions, then she lacks character, as does the work in which she appears". How she

---

<sup>18</sup> I am reminded of hearing Thomas Kenneally speak after his novel *Towards Asmara* (1989) was published, when he talked of the domestic novel versus the political. He had inferred that "women novelists" were accused of the former. Male novelists lauded for the latter. The greatness of Patrick White, he said on that occasion, was his easy ability to traverse both domains. He himself, he claimed modestly, did not have that facility.

“reveals” those decisions is not cut-and-dried. The novel “as a genre produces a text of consciousness which becomes the expected location for articulations of decision, whether or not these are communicated by one fictional person to another”. Nevertheless, there must be some “verbal” confirmation of decision. The alternatives are either silence or being deluded by “false distinctions”. In Goethe’s novel (*Elective Affinities*), Benjamin finds Otilie to be a “figure of unconsciousness” and he asserts “that ‘No ethical resolution can come into life without verbal form’ (GW 176)...This shift of emphasis onto the ‘verbal form’ that a given decision takes is appropriate to the modern genre that concerns Benjamin, the novel”. That character “is a matter of a person’s relation to language”, Leacock continues, is implicit in Aristotle’s defining of character in a tragedy as “revealed in moments of decision”.

As a personage, then, Isabel tends to drift. She drifts literally between Brisbane and her southern Tablelands town causing consternation in both camps, which she fails to take on board. It is Lev, finally, who initiates decision. He has known all along what his chief desire is and he decides to follow it. That it may have been the “wrong” decision when the context of the Prologue and Epilogue are taken in account does not preclude his *ethical* necessity. Decision is holy and transcendent according to Benjamin and it results in redemption, not mere sacrifice (Leacock 2002, p. 284).

### In Her Defence

Earlier, I described how Isabel evoked a “response” in me; that it was a negative response is beside the point. The disdain to which I’ve admitted must bring an unconscious rapport with her and I suggest that those factors in her “personality” which so annoy me, and the even more disdained traits of Violette Cameron before her, must be the secret link between author and character. Perhaps this is a necessary cause in the creation of character.

Disdain is particularly evoked not only in Isabel’s erratic behaviour but in her failure to verbalise her behaviour. She does not explain to herself or to her husband exactly why she travelled to Brisbane in the first place and her

subsequent abrupt departure from that city is just as unexplained. She herself can only disdain her Camille-like pose on the train home. She repeats this pattern – the flight to Brisbane, the abrupt return home – and it is now both men who are left in the dark, her husband and Lev. After a third flight she seems to have made a change, only to be abandoned by Lev’s decision, which he was bound to make all along. If she could make a difference even then she fails to, apparently prohibited by her becoming infected with Spanish ‘Flu.

She has not committed herself to Lev’s politics nor does she adhere to her husband’s. Lev, the atheistic Bolshevik, has told her that it is not he who believes in nothing but she herself. She dreads this judgement.

She scatters proofs of the rigidity of her class-consciousness around yet refuses to have live-in maids and even embarks on an experiment in doing the laundry. She is of a superior class to the Martins and yet has become their unlikely friend. She seems to have no genuine insight into her contradictions.

On the other hand, she illustrates her readiness to act when she deliberately uses Katherine (as she sees it) to inveigle Lev into coming around for dinner, just as she “conspired” to tempt her cousin Madeleine into joining her in the Sunday march to the Domain where she could make contact with him. With regard to these, she does have insight into motives which she values as slightly grubby.

In all these failures, she may not be an ethical character, but it seems to me that Isabel is not that far from a real-life person. Only a “personage”? Relatively passive, perhaps, but her unwillingness to “believe”, her inability to find coherency in her actions might just as well describe the position of post-Marxist, post-Market-Economy man. To that extent, the character Isabel was deliberately set adrift.

### Desire and Transcendence

Somehow, in spite of herself, Isabel does find coherency and does decide. That “the world” stands in her way only reinforces her relativizing of this “world” and propels her from her early narcissism (the “solitary individual” who is



“uncounseled” and cannot counsel others <sup>19)</sup> into transcendence. What she has apparently transcended is the profound perplexity of the living which Walter Benjamin (1969, p. 87) says is evidenced in the novel as a genre.

Let me make the distinction here that I did not intend to resolve the problem precisely in the Romantic manner, as Steiner (1986, p. 16) describes it: “The Romantic answer is an apocalypse of desire, an erotic consummation so complete that it annuls the autism of personal identity”.<sup>20</sup> Isabel offers love and Lev receives it as his passport to immortality, or at least to being remembered. What Lev has understood in the midst of the betrayals of his life and its purposes shows him that his death is of no great consequence. What Isabel has understood, over the years of her pain and her joy in finally attaining to Aberdeen, is that she has overcome the loss of Lev by her continuing love for him. It is this that makes the moment eternal.

Whether or not I am justified in such an attempt at a “scintilla of wisdom” <sup>21</sup> is certainly one of the major questions I would ask of myself in assessing the success of my own novel. Just how such an inadequate personality as Isabel Greene reached this equilibrium, and could proffer it back to the one who gave it to her, is the question that rears its head at this point.

And that question turns out to be related to the doubtful delivery of my first intention. The genesis of *The Russian and Mrs Greene* lies in that primary, precious intention of mine but it seems I have strayed very far. Or should I say Isabel has strayed? What of the original anecdote – the boys (returned soldiers) slipping across the border at night, the image which seeded the entire novel? Yes, Isabel does bring it into the body of the text. Additionally, her own experiences of the camp and of the illness itself, among other allusions,

---

<sup>19</sup> “The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life”. Walter Benjamin (1969, p. 87)

<sup>20</sup> Steiner (1986, p. 16) illustrates with this quotation from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*: “Isolde you, Tristan I, no longer Tristan, not Isolde; without naming, without parting, new recognition, new consuming; endless everlasting single-consciousness”.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin (1969, p. 87) states that even “the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom”.

describe the Spanish 'Flu pandemic as it affected Australians. But my first intention was greater than this one anecdote. I spoke above about the "meaning" inherent in events. Whether Isabel Greene can show the meaning of my first intention remains to be seen.

After all my struggles, is Isabel the right choice? In picking her, have I betrayed that precious intention of the novel? Am I facing a double failure, for I need to admit here I'm niggled by the anxiety that I've bestowed on Isabel an end to which she does not measure up? Perhaps the answer to these questions may be found by looking now at what seemed at the beginning of these reflections to be a minor layer of the text.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METAPHOR OF THE GARDEN

#### I – The Image

My unlikely leading lady had a heavy responsibility. Her duty was to tell the story – and without that telling there is no novel. But she was additionally burdened. This character, whom I disregarded at first and subsequently disdained, had to carry the weight of the original intentions of the novel. I have addressed the second and third intentions but the primary, most “precious” one is even more problematic and I’m concerned that in choosing Isabel I have betrayed it.

I’ve brought into play the idea of “meaning”. In the making of art, a transfiguration usually takes place. The story from childhood, for instance, may dress in different clothes, speak with another accent. But its meaning survives and even, at best, sharpens. So does Isabel carry the meaning inherent in my primary intention? I suggest that she does. Not only this, but I propose that Isabel has delivered the thematic unity of *The Russian and Mrs Greene* through the use of metaphor. It is the very concentration on the erotic life, which worried me in the previous chapter, that opens up the space for this to take place.

Desire in the Aristotelian sense is not restricted to the erotic. It is the logic of our action.<sup>22</sup> And so Isabel’s *eros* is not unrelated to Lev’s passionate dedication to his Marxist purpose. It is true that I was conscious of this shadowing as I wrote the novel. What was only partly conscious at times, or

---

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Richardson’s statement that “[d]esire (*orexis*) and the good (*to agathon*) are the central notions Aristotle deploys in his account of animal movement in *De Anima*...” (Richardson 1992, p. 381)

even unconscious, was the complexity of the technique I applied to weave these two shadowing levels into something approaching unity. It is only in retrospect that I truly understand how the web of metaphor and image works in my novel.

Metaphor, image, symbol relate the author and the story to a deep place of creativity, to what some call the unconscious. This is a country of the night. It is not a landscape that can be diagrammed and tacked map-like to the wall while the author plods through the narrative. At the same time it is the author's own territory and he does, of course, have dominion over it. It is this blurring of the boundary of possession that eventually produces the goods, the expected baby delivered in an untimely fashion, the sex unknown, the miracle of Who? about to unfold. That is to say, the author does and does not know and this may apply very strongly to the use of imagery. On reflection, I understand that Isabel spoke the images and I formed the metaphor. The metaphor in this sense is the basket that holds the multiple connected images of a novel.

There can be, rightly, a sceptical response to some of my romantic ramblings above. In an unrelated argument against the distinction between allegory and symbolism, Scholes and Kellogg contend that the distinction is "invidious". Yeats and Blake see:

symbolism as being organic, non-intellectual, pointing to some mystical connection between the mind of the poet and that unreal world which is the shaping mind or soul ... (Scholes and Kellogg 1968, p.107)

In this view, allegory is "overtly intellectual" and shows the world in a superficial, mechanical way. On the other hand, Scholes and Kellogg (1968 p.107) insist that: "[n]arrative requires an irreducible minimum of rationality which inevitably tames and limits the meaning of the vaguest of images". While this argument of symbolism versus allegory is not mine, I take the point. I also agree that there is an essential interaction between my "country of the night" and the author's rational intelligence. But it is of interest here to see how this interaction actually works. I'd suggest that the "shaping" takes place at this

point of interaction. This is the author's task in using metaphor: to work at the meeting point between not-knowing and knowing.

### The Practice of Metaphor

"The essence of metaphor is to connect", according to Weimann and he claims that:

metaphor is neither an autonomous nor an ornamental aspect of poetry but forms the very core and center of that poetic statement by which man as a social being imaginatively comprehends his relation to time and space and, above all, to the world around him. (Weimann 1974, p.150)

Weimann (1974, pp.166-7) calls for an understanding of Shakespeare's imagery as not only reflective of "poetic genius" but that it draws on a "very specific stage of development in the English language, which combined both a vast range of reference ...with a unique... freedom...to transpose". He suggests that there is a link between the times and the power of metaphor – in that sense, Shakespeare reflected "a revolutionary position of discovery and experimental activity".

It is worth following Weimann's (1974, pp. 153-6) overview of the history of criticism in metaphor. Thought in the 17<sup>th</sup> - early 18<sup>th</sup> century put value on what Pope delineated as that "drawn from the true nature and inherent qualities of each subject" – metaphor's relationship to mimesis and the requirements of plot. The Romantic view was otherwise: metaphor was seen in relation to the "poet's" expression of himself and that expression was mainly achieved through the creation of character and subsequently the overflow of the poet's feeling to the reader's affect. Both saw metaphor as implicitly functional. Reacting to this, the modern critical view could be best summarised in T. S. Eliot's reference (in the Preface to Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*) to that "pattern below the level of 'plot' and 'character'". Weimann nods to Knight's

insight that: “We have failed to focus correctly the Shakespearian unity.” T. E. Hulme, in celebrating image as “the very essence of intuitive language” and in stating that by comparison the “subject doesn’t matter”, first presented this elevation. The problem here, Weimann contends, is that plot and character were thereby relegated to a surface level or were not “quite compatible” with this underlying pattern. There rose the idea of autonomy where, as Ortega y Gasset put it, “metaphor obliterates or annihilates an object” because it corresponds to man’s instinctive need to “shun certain realities”.

In practice, I am drawn to Weimann’s praise words when he contends that Shakespeare:

did not use...an alien name for its own sake, he was not...alienating the object by abstracting the vehicle from the underlying matter. Rather Shakespeare ...release[d] an absolute host of energies and tensions in the metaphoric process of his language. (Weimann 1974, pp.166-7)

I see the “essence of metaphor” as a two-fold process, firstly faithfulness to the underlying matter and, secondly, the release of energies. There is no workable metaphor without this two-foldedness. Let me speak here of the English writer, Penelope Fitzgerald, exemplary in this regard. On Fitzgerald’s death, Philip Hensher, writing in the *Spectator*, said: “Of all the novelists in English of the last century, she has the most unarguable claim on greatness”.<sup>23</sup> Fitzgerald’s “greatness” is as much to do with style and the peculiar qualities of her prose, truly poetic in the dimensionality of her symbols. In her historical novel, *The Gate of Angels*, the innocent and duty-bound Fred makes a visit home to The Rectory so that he might confess his fully accomplished loss of faith to his cleric father. Fred’s getting off the train and walking up the road are rendered in quite exquisite language, thick, languorous, summer-filled to the point where I, as reader, found I had to force myself out of the long grass and

---

<sup>23</sup> See cover of Harper Perennial’s 2006 edition of Penelope Fitzgerald’s *The Bookshop*. Though I see that this claim by Hensher is rendered as: “Of all the novelists in English of the last quarter-century, she has the most unarguable claim on greatness” on the cover of an earlier publication, Fitzgerald’s *The Means of Escape* 2001.

free of the seductive tendrils. It was this very beauty which allowed the reverberations of meaning to work so subtly and so very well, as in this:

The bushes, too, were motionless, but from the crowded stalks and the dense hedges there came a perpetual furtive humming, whining and rustling which suggested an alarming amount of activity out of sight. Twigs snapped and dropped from above, sticky threads drifted across from nowhere, there seemed to be something like an assassination, on a small scale, taking place in the tranquil heart of summer. (Fitzgerald 2004, pp. 40-1)

While powerfully right in context the word “assassination” here, precisely because of its at once humorous and discordant nature, stuns the reader into the dimensionality Fitzgerald intends. Predominantly, she is referring to the coming assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, a minor event under different conditions but which acted as the catalyst for world war. On yet another level, as it is Fred’s perceptions of this journey up the road we are privy to, Fitzgerald is letting us sense how overwhelmed Fred is by concern that his unprepared father will be “deeply distressed” (Fitzgerald 2004, p.34) at the declaration about to be thrust upon him. His anxiety is that he may assassinate his father by the news of this demise of faith. Fred’s character is illuminated by this play of emotions in him: the truly uncalled-for confession and the innocence behind it, and the loving nature that feels such remorse at what he feels he must do, not only to his father, perhaps, but to God in whom he once believed. The entirety of Chapter Five (only fourteen pages long) from which this passage comes allows us access to Fred’s probably unarticulated incorporation of a luxuriant and humane early life, his own backdrop, and in this way presents us with a counter-point to the cerebral bachelor existence of Fred-the-Fellow at St. Angelicus.

In turn, this fuller picture of Fred makes him more of a candidate for the peculiar happening which besets him one day or, more properly, his peculiar perception of it. Further, the “assassination” passage also whispers of the mystery set us at the beginning of the novel – two “unknown” characters have

disappeared into seeming thin air after an accident on another country road, that before-mentioned peculiar happening in which Fred was involved. Is there a crime? Could it be murder? Have ghosts been afoot? Behind this mystery, and the novel as a whole, is the possibility of a lurking metaphysical reality. And finally the passage awakes the reader, in dread, to a retrospective awareness of the slaughter about to come, the mass killing-out of Fred's generation in the poppy fields of Flanders. Yet captured like Fred himself within the year of the main action of the novel, 1912, we do not know what will happen to him subsequently. Fitzgerald allows intimations and even conversation of coming trouble but she ends the book before the war begins as if it were never going to begin – the innocence that resides in the tranquil heart of summer for all of us.

Fitzgerald's writing is heavy with such interplays, yet remarkably remains a simple enough read, even a thing of beauty. She is master of the packed phrase, the naturalness of its context.<sup>24</sup>

### The Tool

Harvey understands Charles Dickens' relationship with imagery as personal. His imagination, Harvey contends, was "primitive, animistic":

I think we misread him slightly if we take his quickening power as merely conceit or metaphor or symbol; I believe this inanimate world was, for him, literally alive. (Harvey 1970, p. 37)

He also wishes to support Steiner in an argument against reading too much symbolic content into Flaubert's description in *Madame Bovary* of Charles' schoolboy cap (Harvey 1970, pp. 37-8). In his study of character in the novel, Harvey's perspective is from the reader who says, "How real!" (p.196). Overall,

---

<sup>24</sup> To step outside of the metaphorical argument for a moment it is worth noting that the invitation Fitzgerald issues the reader, to enter here into a lop-sided relationship with the character who is ignorant of future world events, and who does not find out, either, for the entire length of the book's life, is one she issues again to good effect in *The Beginning of Spring*. This quite pointed technique gives an unusual tension between reader and character, and the bells of foreboding are all the more horrifying and instructive for that. Her influence on my novel is clear. Isabel's transcendent letter is read by Lev in 1937, after all.



Harvey's plea is for the "loose, baggy monsters"<sup>25</sup>, the "antediluvian" type of novel which "dares to remain open to life, which dares to say, 'This is life!'". He qualifies his concluding remarks to his book by saying that he does not mean to "neglect the formal properties" of a novel in his enthusiasm for "content" (p.183). It seems to me that from the perspective to which he admits, he is quite correct in his stress.

Nevertheless, language is a representation. Language communicates. It is also the novelist's tool. When a writer attends to her own apprenticeship, she does not attempt to "polish" language as if it were a dining table. She hones it as a wood-turner does his tool and for similar purpose, that it better and more accurately achieves the required end. Language is not separate from the whole.<sup>26</sup> It is not an aesthetic extra. As Walter Benjamin rightly says, "content and language form a certain unity ...like a fruit and its skin" (Benjamin 1969, p.75). That unity might not be a "something" which the author can point to like plot and character, but an unpicking can begin to reveal it. To this extent, I find myself in the invidious position of agreeing with my "enemies" and finding fault with my "friends", for I do sympathise with Harvey's argument against over-criticism of a text. I have to take a different tack, at least to some degree, and concentrate my gaze as I try to unpick my own text. D. H. Lawrence, not one of my favourite thinkers<sup>27 28</sup>, makes the point that:

---

<sup>25</sup> In his biography of Tolstoy, A. N. Wilson suggests one can "take too seriously Henry James's fastidious dismissal of Tolstoy's 'loose, baggy monsters'. There is more 'structure' in *Anna Karenina* than in the novels of Dickens and Trollope". (Wilson 1989, p. 280)

<sup>26</sup> Harvey (1965, p.209) cites J. Holloway who makes a related point in *The Charted Mirror*: "The question is: would ...studying the language [only]...exclude *anything* from our consideration of a play ...? Certainly not: there is nothing whatever in a play – not plot, not characterisation, not even the Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines ... which we could conceivably study in any way save by a study of the language of the play. There is nothing else to study". Quoted in *Character and the Novel* by W. J. Harvey (1965, p. 209).

<sup>27</sup> It is not relevant here for me to enquire why I am particularly repelled by some of Lawrence's essays and what I perceive as his narcissism, Freudian over-kill and a sad kind of sexual self-promotion. Perhaps my revulsion has nothing to do with Lawrence at all.

<sup>28</sup> Further to this, I read the following in *The [London] Independent on Sunday* [Paul Binding, 2004]: "(Stephen) Spender believed that most artists make from their lives mythological constructs, Lawrence being an extreme – and admired – example: that is, they raise certain events, encounters, relationships to a metaphoric level, rendering them parts of universal as well as individual experience, and so providing what he called 'a grammar of images'".

Some images, in the course of many generations of men, become symbols, embedded in the soul and ready to start alive when touched ... (Lawrence 1979, p.544)

It seems clear to me that when one of these “symbols” is used to good effect in a novel, the reader will “get” the subliminal message. This is not to say the process of communication is conscious on either side of the transaction. But the text itself must hold the outward thrust of this communication. From the author’s perspective, then, the “formal properties” have a greater relevance.

In *The Russian and Mrs Greene* language is in the hands of Isabel Greene (for the sake of suspension of disbelief) since she is the narrator of the bulk of the book. In the completed novel, Isabel uses a particular image, or variations on an image. Or should I say, she sees it and speaks it. From whence does it come?

## II – The Garden of Eden

Isabel Greene is swamped by gardens. Or at least, she is so sensitive to them that they become recurring images in her world. And the garden is, perhaps, the primeval image of humankind.

It is said that Mesopotamia (“between the rivers”) was the original Paradise. The Sumerians, who passed on their stories orally at first, began to use a phonetic script pressed on to clay tablets and these texts have come down to us. Brock and Parker (2008, pp. 5-7) state that “it is easy to see the traces of Sumerian stories in Genesis. Their creation stories, explaining the origin of the universe and the organising of that world, have clear resonance with Biblical myth”. [And bear in mind that Abraham’s lineage is traced to the last capital of Sumeria, Ur. Abraham’s significance is in his “fathering” of the original peoples of the three major monotheistic religions.] Just as in Genesis where, in the maelstrom of creation, God’s spirit hovers over the waters, in Sumerian texts Nammu, the goddess of the watery abyss, was the originating force and she created lesser gods who were the heavens and the earth. Together these two lesser gods formed one block, the cosmos, which was divided into three tiers of the heavens, the earth and the underworld of the dead. The Sumerian paradise was called Dilmun:

The land Dilmun is a pure place,  
The place, after Enki had laid himself by his wife.  
That place is clean, that place is bright.  
In Dilmun the raven uttered no cries,  
The lion killed not,  
The wolf snatched not the lamb,  
Unknown was the grain-devouring boar.  
The singer utters no wail,  
By the side of the city he utters no lament. <sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Brock and Parker cite this text from Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, p.55)

The Sumerians did not claim they could pinpoint the exact location of this paradise. As Brock and Parker (2008, p. 7) say, “it was located just east of [Sumer] on a sacred mountain. This combination of specificity of description and vagueness of location gave it both a sense of reality and of inaccessibility – a place true and real but belonging to no ruler, city or civilization”.

Later Greek and Roman ideas of paradise echo these descriptions of Dilmun. Homer’s *Odyssey* tells of a “great orchard island with two abundant springs. [Homer] also explained that the immortals sent persons to the Elysian plain, a theme reiterated in the *Aeneid*, in which the Elysian Fields were a natural earthly paradise in the lower world. Virgil, Ovid and Horace were among other writers who described a golden past, Happy Isles :

Hesiod described a golden age when humanity ‘lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief.’ After death, ‘they dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands, with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.’ (Brock and Parker 2008, p. 92)

The Persians adapted paradise to mean a walled garden and constructed “huge *paridaida*...with trees, streams, vegetation, and animals for hunting”. Rare and exotic animals became fitting tributes from client countries to the kings of Persia and these caused the gardens to become something like zoos (Brock and Parker 2008, p.11).

### The Trajectory

The Judeo-Christian tradition presents paradise in the image of an earthly home of milk and honey where Adam and Eve first came to consciousness.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden ...out of the ground the Lord God made every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, and the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil....A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden....The

man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. (Genesis 2: 8-20) <sup>30</sup>

Through their “sin” – plucking the fruit of knowledge of good and evil for themselves – Adam and Eve lost their harmony with all things and were thrust out into a world of pain and sweat. The next major drama “recorded” in the Genesis story was a death, in fact a murder. Cain killed his brother, Abel, and the original family was sundered.

Aeons later, another garden appeared in the poetry of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>31</sup> The poem weaves between the grief-stricken bride seeking her beloved – “I sought him everywhere but I could not find him ...Have you seen him? Have you seen the one I love”? (SS 3: 2-3)<sup>32</sup> – and the two lovers singing of their mutual joy as they extol each other’s delights: “The flowers appear on the earth, and the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance”.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, they promise a breakthrough in the curse put upon mankind, arriving at the conclusion that love is as strong as death. Death does not, after all, have the only word (SS 8: 6-7).

Centuries pass and another garden, this time in the Second <sup>34</sup> Testament, also speaks of love and death. In the Gospel of *John*, Mary of Magdala weeps at the tomb. Resonant of the bride in the *Song of Songs*, Mary is bewildered that she cannot find the body of the one she loves. She stands at the tomb where he was laid three days earlier after his crucifixion. She is asked: “‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him’”. The gardener speaks to her, calling her by name, and she recognises him. She discovers that love is restored to her.

---

<sup>30</sup> The Biblical texts used will be from *The Holy Bible RSV* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>31</sup> Brock and Parker (2008, p.17) illustrate the linguistic evidence for linking the two “gardens”: “The actual word *pardès* rarely occurs in the Bible. One place it is used is in the Song of Solomon (also called the Song of Songs...)”.

<sup>32</sup> Most quotations from the *Song of Songs* here will be from Bloch 1998 and will be referred to as SS.

<sup>33</sup> *The Song of Solomon* 2:11-13, The Holy Bible RSV.

<sup>34</sup> Also referred to as the “New” Testament as opposed to the “Old”.

But he warns her not to cling to him (*John* 20: 11-18). The complete manifestation of paradise is not, for this moment, fully attainable.

## Utopia

The longing for Paradise is not just a memory. It is a lure into a better future. Perhaps, at this level, we are speaking of Paradise as another metaphor for the drive to creativity, for the imaginative faculty which precedes any forward motion. We are drawn to the Good, Aristotle insists.<sup>35</sup> Utopian dreams do seem to have some connection with the Garden of Eden myth. Christopher Columbus believed he had found the Garden when he first encountered the New World.

The very word *Utopia* suggests a very human relationship with the idea. When Sir Thomas More, basing his book on Plato's *Republic*, entitled it *Utopia* he would have done so with a double meaning in mind. The word comes from Greek and breaks down into "not" and "place". But the Greek *Utopia* has a homophone, *Eutopia*, which breaks down into "good" and "place".<sup>36</sup> This good place is a not place, much like Dilmun which is never specifically located. Utopia does not exist nor could it, "realistically". This acceptance of "reality" has not hindered others from interpreting the word as pointing to a place which might be made to exist.

In my novel, the association of the Garden with a Utopian dream is specifically applied to Lev and his Bolshevism. This runs into an historical contradiction. Jurij Streidter speaks of the:

complex and controversial relationship between Marxism and utopism. Friedrich Engels made a strict discrimination between his own, new Marxist approach, and the preceding French "Utopian Socialists"... Engels also significantly entitled his criticism: "The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science" (1882). This can be understood as coming out of the conviction that Marxism, as the only genuinely scientific

---

<sup>35</sup> Richardson states that Aristotle describes "...the content of the object of desire...in terms of the good of an animal ..." (Richardson, 1995, p. 394)

<sup>36</sup> I owe this etymology to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopian>

approach, had definitely left behind, and therefore disqualified, all kinds of utopism. (Streidter 1982, p. 35)

Nevertheless, revolutionary post-(Great)war literature was not necessarily so “scientific”. Streidter cites Lukács, in his Foreword to *The Theory of the Novel*, stating that these novels which strove for a new world and were based on a “highly naïve and totally unfounded utopism” revealed a strain which existed in the period and Lukács comments that:

One may with good reason smile at this primitive utopism, but it expresses, nevertheless, a spiritual movement which really existed at the time. (Streidter 1982, p. 35)

### Memory of Paradise

...therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden... He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3: 23-24)

Behind the mythic hope lies a bitter experience. Why dream of a better place if this one already answers us? Expressing the Pythagorean/Platonic view that the world was a cave, Empedocles speaks of man’s descent from the world of the gods to the “pleasureless country” and in the *Commentary on the Golden Verses* XXIV 2, Hierocles records that those who fall into this place “wander in the darkness on the meadows of Ruin” (Barnes 1987, p. 197).

At the same time, implied in Aristotle’s philosophy is the understanding that we cannot remember that which has never touched us.<sup>37</sup> Following Aristotle,

---

<sup>37</sup> As an example of this, let me quote Aristotle when he asserts in *On Memory and Reminiscence* that: “... one must get hold of a starting-point. This explains why it is that persons are supposed to recollect sometimes by starting from mnemonic loci. The cause is that they pass swiftly in thought from one point to another, e.g. from milk to white, from white to

Aquinas states that it is “natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects” and goes on to cite Dionysius: “(Coel. Hier. I): We cannot be enlightened by the divine rays except they be hidden within the covering of many sacred veils” (Kreeft 1990, pp. 47-8).<sup>38</sup>

In his commentary on this Answer, Peter Kreeft shows how Aquinas can illuminate the fault underlying the divide that modern hermeneutics creates between demythologisers and fundamentalists: St Thomas “cuts across this either/or and maintains that a passage could rightly be interpreted both literally (“historically”) and symbolically (“spiritually”) .... behind this hermeneutic is a metaphysic: the sacramental view of nature and history, according to which things and events as well as words can be *signs* as well as *things*, can be means by which other things are signified and known as well as being things known themselves” (Kreeft 1990, p. 48).

I haven't proved here the connection between Paradise Lost and Paradise Found motifs but I think it true to say that the cross-cultural myth of a former paradise has inspired dreams of its refounding.

---

mist, and thence to moist, from which one remembers Autumn (the 'season of mists'), if this be the season he is trying to recollect”. My copy: [www.classics.mit.edu/aristotle/memory.html](http://www.classics.mit.edu/aristotle/memory.html), trans. J. I. Beare.

<sup>38</sup> The Summa reference for this is: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, [Part 1, 1, 8].



### III – Rambling Around the Garden

Isabel’s garden imagery speaks of *things* in themselves. Does it also speak of more than itself? To answer this, let us begin by examining the text of my completed novel, *The Russian and Mrs Greene*, to find the metaphoric structure of the unified whole – if there is such a thing.

I admit to this being a journey of adventure for me, since I begin not knowing where I will end. So I will present my quest as if in the present tense, as it were, coming with surprise on certain scenes and listening with ear cupped for reverberations of imagery to lead me further in. I will ramble around the garden.

In advance of my setting out, I already know I will need to address something that has given me anxiety about my finished novel. The Epilogue of *The Russian and Mrs Greene* offers a resolution, but epilogues can present a problem. Since they are often at a distance from the main narrative, to what extent do the two parts form a seamless whole? Do the characters chime with their former selves? Is there a necessary cause somewhere in what happened during the narration which effects what happens “in the end”? Specifically, does Mrs Greene end up in the appropriate place and if so how have I established this appropriateness? Is it possible to see metaphor acting as *the* or at least *a* necessary cause?

#### Isabel’s Garden

Isabel Greene reveals that there has been a “garden” in her past. It is a place of ambivalence for her, a refuge that speaks of her need for refuge. It is her grandmother’s garden at Aberdeen, a small and elegant property in the bush where all the family gathered at different times. Isabel seems to have spent some of her childhood there. Her family background is not otherwise discussed in the text. In other words, Aberdeen and the magical garden are that which her memory passes to her when she connects with Lev. Throughout the text,

however, gardens of all sorts are brought into her experience and her instantaneous reflections. The first of these images comes right at the opening pages of her narration. When she and her cousin Madeleine drive to the boarding house where two other important characters, Lev and Katherine, are introduced to us, she says:

Madeleine brings the motor-car to a crawl and we both peer at the houses on the other side, each on their own pockets of land, their gardens attaining various degrees of success. It's a strange kind of a street, neither fish nor fowl....

Overhanging the footpath, shading a patch of the road, is a tree which seems to grow like weed in this humid town. I don't know its name.

When she re-emerges from the boarding house to climb back in the car, she first notices that: "A moth drops to the bonnet, either dead or dying, and lies there in a grave of fallen leaves. ... Katherine ... begins walking down the garden path".

Even in the following chapter (Two), which is set during a night at the theatre and the subsequent partying afterwards, she finds images which bring her into a garden or bush setting. The socialite women are perceived in this fashion: "the feathers in women's hair arching in the excited air", and at the end of that passage she sees "...O'Meara ... set upon by three shimmering women with loud and throaty voices and a man of sixty who's as gaudily volatile as his sparrow companions". Further on she describes them unflatteringly as "bright peacocks". But more tellingly, when she is invited into another room where the Russians are gathered quite separate from the socialites, she describes herself unflatteringly in similar terms:

What do they see? A woman faded into middle age, sheathed in pink silk, borrowed but of course they couldn't know that, a silly pink feather planted in hair which is not alive as it used to be nor as fair.

When Norah Martin is introduced some chapters later, her hat is shown to be something ridiculous:

There's a subtle shift of her elbows as if a grounded bird stilled on a summery day wanted to air its wings. The feather in her old hat's at right-angles to its quill. The world is pitiless.

The Martins, including Katherine, are seen as lower-class. (I've shown how the novel as a whole discusses class.) The mother of the family is especially "poor", not only financially but because she was abandoned by her husband. Her subsequent trials only add to this perception. The feather in Norah's hat is broken. The brokenness indicates something of class but it is significant that Isabel has previously used the same feather image for herself. Isabel's feather is silly (though possibly no more than the "peacock" feathers in the socialite room) but additionally she describes herself as "faded" and her hair "not alive". In this way she begins to reveal her identification with Norah Martin's poverty. This identification is seen quite clearly at the very end of her narration. For the moment, however, Isabel does not understand how profoundly she recognises Norah. She is keen to show the difference. She does not suffer as much as Norah (and others) suffer:

[Norah] turns her head, the feather's tip pointing like a compass. She should really pluck it out altogether. ...

"Oh, it has to rain soon. It can't go on like this." I'm saying only what everyone says. I can't think of one original thing to say about it. Drought is eating us up but the truth is I'm the least afflicted. I don't count on the grass, nor on a crop of any kind.

### Isabel's Language

Isabel's transformation begins when she meets Lev. The night of the theatre, when she and Lev spend a few minutes alone together, changes her language. The next morning (Chapter Three) she wakes into a sensuousness:

Through the slits of my eyes, I see a mist of mid-morning light glint among rubbery leaves. There's a green interlock of them massed up behind the white balustrades of the verandah, pushing against the posts, fingering through the trellis work. Madeleine's garden is a swamp with leaf, under daily threat from torrid growth. Down here on the coast, no house withstands it unless effort is thrown back at it, cutting at it, pruning its edges.<sup>39</sup> At this silent hour, it's in subtle equilibrium with me and with the verandah, with the air flowing endlessly through the rooms, the air which remains both coolly separate from it and suffers kinship with it.

After a message arrives from Lev, she tells [but only to us] of what happened during those moments alone with him and describes herself quite differently from her "faded" self of an hour or so before those moments. She has become "giddy as a girl", and as "the cab clopped alongside the river" the river affects her as "the heart-beat lap of water". Her experience of Lev begins to form her consciousness into an erotic reception of nature. The rest of her narration is a playing out of this dynamic, the metaphor gaining strength and losing it as their relationship dictates. But at the time of the message arriving, she is still capable of "pruning its edges" and so, because she feels she made a fool of herself, she leaves Brisbane and returns to her husband. She is also on the run from the complexity of unfamiliar feelings, uncomfortable with the "Camille-like" (as she says in the train on the way home) posturing which she equates with this infatuation.

### A Savage Kind of Garden

Home is in a cooler climate, high on the Tablelands of northern New South Wales. It is "crystal". There is drought and frost up there, as opposed to the

---

<sup>39</sup> I have no doubt that I borrowed this jungle image from a poem by Judith Wright, *New Guinea Legend: The Finding of the Moon* (Wright 1971, pp. 246-253). This is a poem whose images remain strong in my memory. It particularly affects me. This "being affected" is critical in the author's conscious, unconscious and semi-conscious (the most likely position) sorting of images assaulting his senses, memory and intellect. The constancy of the jungle's encroaching on the village in Wright's poem seeped quite naturally into my novel at this point.

steaminess of Brisbane where Lev lives. In Chapters Four and Five, Isabel is aware of the natural world in her Tablelands home but it is a savage kind of garden:

A savage wind is blowing up. The earth's so dry that dust is rising like ghosts from the roads and the paddocks. It will adhere to the dressing table, the mirror, the chest of drawers. It's like ash.

There is only death here. Ghosts, not flesh and blood. She herself is lifeless and, rather than satisfaction, she tastes ashes. She speaks of "...this relentless grip of winter ... the grass lies struggling for life .... at some ruthless hour of the night ...I woke with ankles and calves cold as the dead. God help us, how will we survive all this?" Even here she senses something "other" and she looks -

ahead towards the unending west where in the old days the boys used to disappear off to the droving of cattle from one water-hole to another. Or the tending of sheep, oily and sweet, thousands upon thousands, heavy-coated and tired under that relentless globe out there. But, oh, how I envied those boys, riding off at dawn, away from their mothers, their wives. And when they came back, they were burned brown, tougher, silenced.

Out in the bush, somewhere she has never been, is something which might answer her. She equates her womanhood, or the rules that delineate that state, with the obstacle barring her from it. This special bush place, this "west", comes up more than once in the text as itself, but it is also an unconscious metaphor she uses to reveal her perverse envy of the boys gone to war. They have gone out just as they did before "in the old days", somewhere in the west, no women among them, headed for some mysterious adventure. And she is left at home. Just as is the case with her grandmother's place, Aberdeen, others may take possession but not she. This "somewhere" is her desire, but she cannot go there.

Isabel's paradise is not a neutral place. It arouses her desire or is caused by it depending on the nature of the particular imagery. It engenders both her inner

conflict (she could get up on a horse and go into the “west” if she so chose, after all) and her sense that she is somehow not worthy of it.

She does however find her own place of refuge in the Tablelands. The creek suffers from drought occasionally and is a small thing compared to her dreams, yet she haunts the bridge crossing it. Later, when Paddy Martin returns broken from war, he too haunts this spot. It is a place for the desperate. In a memory passage she recalls a visit to Norah, the midwife who’d helped her following her second miscarriage and who’d witnessed her bleak tears. She reflects on: “the split of a pomegranate, this creek to our valley. That is how I’ve called it, privately, since the days I began to come to life again”. And in the next passage, she recounts:

I had plucked a fruit from Mrs Martin’s garden, when she had one, as I’d walked down her path, plucked it and torn it open. The seeded redness of its insides was more than itself that day. I’d walked on down towards the creek, a morning of the loveliness I was only beginning to see again. The eruption of the mountain lay ahead – people say such shapes are feminine in form, but perhaps I couldn’t bear such a fecund thought. I felt from it instead a strength, a primitive protection. The whole world glistened, the dewy grass and spring leaves, puffs of white cloud alive with light. I held the split fruit in my hand, untasted, as I approached the creek, the decline of the valley. The waters were full and clean. Mountainy waters.

Now, however, drought has come to the Tablelands. In her present time, she walks again down to the bridge over the creek and sees an insect. Drawing from W. B. Yeats’ (1965, p. 197) poem, *Long-Legged Fly*, a poem which has affected me since I first read it<sup>40</sup>, I write that as Isabel gazes from the bridge:

A stick insect is motionless over a dirtied pool, watching I suppose. He’s alone, stranded out here, as desperate as every other animal. I hope he doesn’t sting. Are his wings beating so fast that my eye can’t see? I don’t

---

<sup>40</sup> See my earlier footnote acknowledging the same debt to Judith Wright’s poem, *New Guinea Legend*.

know the hows of so many things. If it doesn't rain soon, we're lost. I wish I hadn't seen this. It scares me.

Her small version of paradise has become a fearful place.

The stick insect (which refers to Yeats' poem) signifies a further thing. Or more than one thing. Yeats sees Michelangelo "with no more sound than the mice make" moving his hand on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: "Like a long-legged fly upon the stream His mind moves upon silence". Seamus Heaney (1997, pp. 24-6) uses a similar moment of motionlessness in his *St Kevin and The Blackbird*<sup>41</sup> and like Yeats compares the scene to a moment of creativity. Both poets speak of themselves, of course, caught in that deathless stillness which generates beauty. They speak also of the universally human power of imagination. Meister Eckhart (Pfeiffer 1992, p. 212) says we can see a rose in winter even when there are no roses, so gifted are we with this power. The image is doubly blessed in that it can invoke more than itself. Yet the great artists know the secret is to show the image in its very this-ness. Merleau-Ponty says of Cezanne:

In his *Peau de Chagrin* Balzac describes a 'white tablecloth, like a covering of snow newly fallen, from which rose symmetrically the plates and napkins crowned with light-coloured rolls'. 'Throughout my youth,' Cezanne said, 'I wanted to paint that table-cloth like freshly fallen snow ...

---

<sup>41</sup> Heaney describes St Kevin in his beehive hut, his arm out the window as he prays, while the bird mistaking him for a tree bough nests in his motionless hand. Then, Kevin's silent acceptance of his role, staying still for weeks till the eggs hatch. The poet continues, questioning:

*Self-forgetful or in agony the whole time*

*From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?  
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?  
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth*

*Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?  
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,  
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,*

*A prayer his body makes entirely  
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird  
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.*

I know now that one must try to paint only: ‘the plates and the napkins rose symmetrically’, and ‘the light-coloured rolls’. If I paint: ‘crowned’, I am finished, you see. And if I really balance and shade my napkins and rolls as they really are, you may be sure that the crowning, the snow and all the rest of it will be there. (Merleau-Ponty 2000, p. 230)

“All the rest of it” was in me to lesser and greater degrees when I wrote of the long-legged insect over the drought-drying creek. The images of the two great Irish poets, the stream, the insect/bird, the observer (St Kevin, Michelangelo, the poet) had struck deep within me, as images tend to do. From these spring both the pastoral beauty and the metaphysical moment. My entire novel, in a way, could be said in an image, perhaps. At least it would have saved a lot of time.

The significance of this cannot be overstated. Images are deeper than thought. They give a work depth and individuality even when the images, as above, are common among poets. But more than this, they hold this “thing” that poets, artists, novelists expend energy on trying to express. Images have a feeling quality. The feeling is inside the author, beyond words. This “feeling” takes on the architecture of a spider’s web, strong and fragile, intricate and simple, strung from point to point, and within that the spider waits until all happens. In the same way, it is now clearer to me that the imagery of *The Russian and Mrs Greene* is strung throughout the book, catching meaning, making an ‘all’ happen. In the complexity of workings that I have just described, the creek and the long-legged insect and all that the image holds sets the compass for the place where Isabel and Lev find themselves at the end of the story, though creeks and insects don’t figure at all in the actual closing scenes.

### Connections

Isabel’s memory of her sense that the surrounding hills had a masculine quality for her – “The eruption of the mountain lay ahead – people say such shapes are



feminine in form...I felt from it instead a strength, a primitive protection..." – is an annunciation of her future. Later she admits that from the first she knew Lev would effect transformation in her life but at this early stage she doesn't manage this coherency.

The images which come to her mind as she stands on the creek's bridge are suggestive in further ways. In saying "Are his [the winged insect's] wings beating so fast that my eye can't see? I don't know the hows of so many things..." Isabel, representing the times, struggles with the hows of politics and shifting social structures even while the plot of the novel addresses this theme. The love story element, which includes her psychology, also confronts her struggles with the hows. Perhaps it's a bridge too far to suggest the author herself is unsure of the hows of her novel's workings. But I believe this haziness of intent is central in the success or failure of a metaphorical web, and I shall return to this.

After Isabel has crossed the bridge, she heads for the railway station for no apparent reason. She sees a Russian woman coming off the train. She says of her:

She's Russian, I would swear, but whereas some have the high cheekbones and almond eyes that remind one of dangerous birds, others of the race are like the ploughed earth itself. They are hardly like us, any of them.

The imagery she is swimming in throws up difference, danger. As author, everywhere I look I now see these connections. I did not see them necessarily before this enquiry, or shall I say that some I saw, others I did not. Or some were sharply intended, others only dimly intended. From Isabel's point of view, this passage reveals that images from the Garden trouble rather than delight her. By novel's end, her point of view has changed and settled peacefully. The Garden itself hasn't changed, but she has. She can now live with the piercing of the heart which such a regaining of the Garden entails. Perhaps this metamorphosis is both the underlying shape and theme of the novel. But for the moment, she is in a different mode. The station master tells her:

“I saw a hawk overhead earlier. Big chap. Thought it might be that blighter that took the dog. Did you hear about that, Mrs Greene? Six foot from tip to tip. Swept right in and nabbed the poor bloody pup.”

And as she returns home from the station, she sees two men driving laden carts, whom she recognises as the strangers in the bar where Norah works:

That is who they are, up from the coast probably, heading west with this cargo of food for the cattle and sheep, poor creatures, struggling for their lives in the dusty paddocks, bleating as they gather around dry water holes.

The following chapter, however, reverberates the unspoken reality of war still raging in Europe into Isabel’s tainted garden imagery. A recruiting rally held in the town attracts the attention of the young Martin boys:

The two Martin boys must have joined the recruiting parade after it passed the Railway Hotel. They were probably hiding out in a paddock. The youngsters in the town all seem to spend engaging times on their stomachs these days, lying in ditches and the hollows of the land, behind burned out logs, as they thumb down imagined triggers or hold sticks up to shoulders, firing at one another.

Clearly, this passage also refers to the ditches of Flanders and France (though Isabel would not have been aware of them in those stark terms). But I pose myself the question: is there an underlying motif here? Could this perversion of nature also point to the new reality after the driving out from Paradise, that trajectory of the earlier myths and scriptural stories? I am trying to understand how Isabel’s “feeling” of images originating in Paradise have become threatening. There is death here. In the same episode, she questions who some of the strangers joining the recruiting parade through town might be – “shearers perhaps or drovers who can’t get work now that the animals are dying?” According to the stories and myths, death enters when paradise is lost. And is yet defeated by love. The closing line of my novel alludes to this defeat –

though the image used is not of the Garden itself but rather of the man and woman together (as indeed they were in the Garden).

The structure of the Paradise story (as I have described the trajectory earlier – *Genesis*, *Song of Songs* and *John*) seems to have taken a stronger hold on my novel than I might have imagined. Whether this is memory (the original impression) or Jung’s collective unconscious is too big a question for this study. The significance of all this seems to be the narrowness of the field, an enclosed imagery which, all the same, has been affected and influenced by poetry I’ve read, things I have seen or sense experiences I have had, pictures I’ve looked at, films I’ve watched. So imagery seems to be an enclosed field yet capable of being constantly refreshed. Or at least that is how it appears from my usage in this novel.

### Anti-Paradise

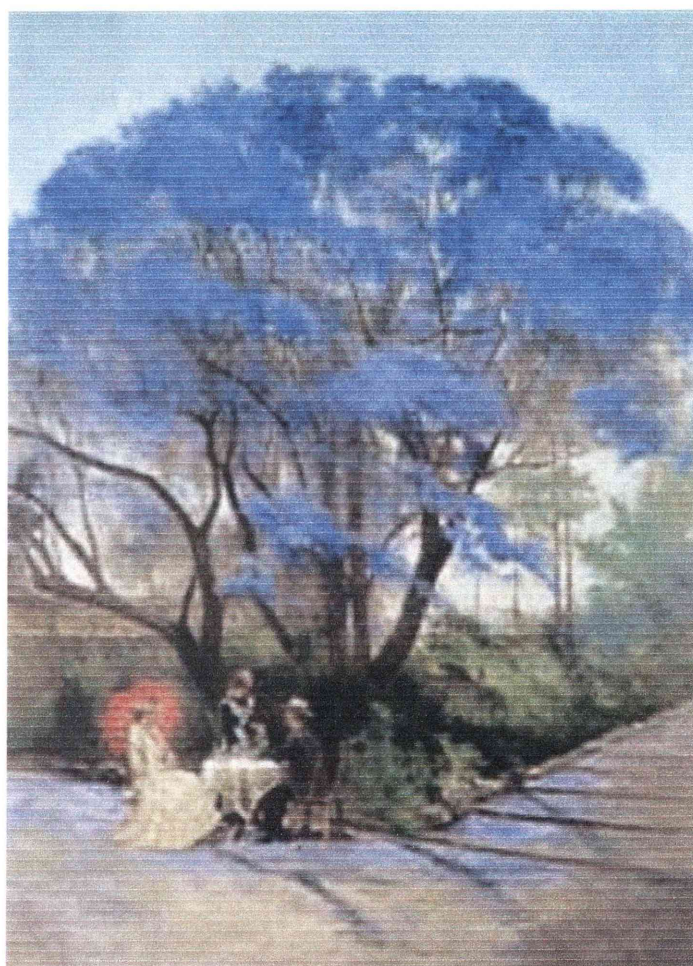
The text continues with anti-Paradise images, if I can put it that way. Bush fire breaks out and:

smoke darkens the day and rag-tags of cindered leaves flap and leap-frog in the air. Eyes sting when a bush-fire is so close. We can see the reddening halo above the ridges where the devilish thing is eating up every shred of tree and dropped bark, scorching kangaroos who are too slow to run and other caught creatures. The birds are gone, flown off in a panic of wild screeching.

The bushfire is like death. The town is in a “pall” of smoke. They could all be burned alive, Isabel says. Her next comment hints at our fear of death, too: “How do we go merrily along as if this weren’t so? Under everything the fear is icy, lurking.” It is the bushfire which drives Isabel out of the Tablelands and down to the coast again. Part One (“War”) of the novel ends here. The next part is entitled “Peace”.

#### IV – Origins Of Image

The first chapter of *Peace* opens in a garden. Isabel, her cousin Madeleine and Madeleine's friend, "the master of irony" Mr Forsythe, are enjoying a picnic in the Botanical Gardens in Brisbane. I based this scene on a painting hanging in the Queensland Art Gallery, Godfrey R. Rivers' *Under the jacaranda*. I note that I did not in any way choose the painting's imagery in order to conform



R. Godfrey Rivers' *Under the jacaranda* 1903  
Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery

to the Paradise motif. I simply “liked it”. Liked it enough to understand it would affect the novel in ways I could not foresee. I recalled that a photograph (seen in a magazine in a dentist’s waiting room) had originated my short novel, *Bad Blood*. That photographic image preceded any plot, character or theme. The “affect” it had on me was enough to get the ball rolling. It was not quite like that with *Under the jacaranda* since I first saw the painting when I was on a research trip to Brisbane fleshing out the novel. In other words, much of the background story was already forming, though the problem of finding the lead character, and therefore the pathway through the novel, was far from solved. Whether it would have turned out to be a quite different novel without that painting’s influence I cannot now say. Someone had to be in that garden under that jacaranda (unless I chose to throw it out). Who was it going to be?

I seem to be returning to the image as originator. I refer back to the Garden of Eden motif in Dumitriu’s novel *Incognito*<sup>42</sup> which was a critical factor in the birth of my own novel, as I outlined earlier. I also recall Irish poet, Vona Groarke<sup>43</sup> explaining that the original force of her poems (and indeed she suggested this was the case with poets in general) was something seen, smelled, touched, heard, something which might translate to the mind as an image, something vague and, I would add, affective. It was difficult for the poet to fully express what this something was. Its very vagueness seemed to be significant, something perhaps caught out of the corner of one’s eye, a tune whistled as a man walks by, the smell of decaying leaves. It often seemed to be something to do with a sense object. In my own case, the Dumitriu novel, read more than thirty years ago and a deeply affective experience, resurrected when I considered writing this novel. Because I changed my mind about the start date of the narration and therefore brought the characters into play during the terrible days of the Great War rather than pre-war, I have lost some of the impact of his

---

<sup>42</sup> Dumitriu’s version of the Garden is clear from this passage: “We had come to a place where the river, swollen by the last of the spring rains, had flooded a tongue of land overgrown with willows. Valentine steered towards it and we glided under a roof of silvery-green leaves between twisted, hollow trunks. The sky was almost hidden; the quivering leaves reflected on the water gave it a milky tinge and the very air seemed green. Bees, butterflies and dragonflies were hovering amid the foliage drinking the sweet sap sucked forth by the sun.

“There’s a snake!” exclaimed Valentine, pointing.” (Dumitriu 1964, pp. 87-8).

<sup>43</sup> Vona Groarke was speaking to a small group of writer-students at Trinity College Dublin in 2000.

structure. The original innocence (which Dumitriu questioned) and sensuousness of the Garden have not been specifically shown in my novel. Yet the image he used haunts my novel one way or the other.<sup>44</sup> But my memory of the Paradise scenes was choosy. The serpent was alarmingly present right from the start in Dumitriu's Paradise even if the young hero took a few pages to see it. Or perhaps the metaphor was brutalised in this way precisely because it was a memory of the hero's – his later self could see the banishment even as he looked back at the sensuality of the original scene. Nevertheless, I carried from my early reading an almost palpable affect of lushness, greenery, gorgeousness and the innocent playfulness of the young before the intrusion of a violent world. It is unavoidable to conclude that my longing for this Paradise interfered with a cool recollection of the text. The metaphor was part of myself before his words re-connected me with it.

Is this passing on of metaphor a form of tradition? I have suggested that the field is narrow and enclosed, that there is perhaps not an infinite number of fundamental metaphors and also that they have a motion or trajectory of some sort. They are not dead things. They are not static, at least in potential. And importantly they are affecting, even while dormant in the consciousness. The unique quality of a writer's use of metaphor, therefore, lies in the dynamism of its energy as Weimann (1974) contends. I would state that a metaphor at its best does come with this host of energies.

### Lev's Garden of Eden

Bearing in mind the argument against the Utopian dream attaching to Marxism, I have allowed in my novel a more Romantic rendering (or the "spiritual movement" acknowledged by Lukás), particularly from Lev's point of view. When Isabel is in the Russian Club rooms helping Yuri with leaflets, she picks

---

<sup>44</sup> I now see, significantly, that Dumitriu's resurrection theme – so unexpected in the circumstances of the brutal story and so unlikely considering the tragedy of his own life (after escaping with his wife one night from Romania during its totalitarian era, he failed to ever find his baby daughter who was to be smuggled out to him later; the authorities did not allow this and hid her whereabouts) – has infiltrated my novel, too. I remark here that my memory of this theme in his novel was choosy. I "remembered" a more certain hope (though crucified and foolish) than is actually there in the text.

up a book by Pushkin, which it seems belongs to Lev. Yuri comments that Lev and Pushkin share a romanticism, that in fact Lev is “too romantic also”. Isabel takes Yuri’s comments as almost an assault on her, both caught up in and contributing to Lev’s romantic power. Perhaps Yuri also hints that Lev and Pushkin are not quite un-romantic enough for revolution. Lev’s earlier description of the cool manipulation of the masses and then his admitting of his unease with this central value were an attempt to set up such a doubt about his credentials.<sup>45</sup> In this way, perhaps, I have escaped the criticism (following Engels) that I’ve mis-applied the Garden metaphor.

I’ve mentioned that Part Two, the Peace section, begins under the jacaranda tree. It is while Isabel is here that the Russians re-enter her life and Lev begins to show his hand. The Russians have just finished their Sunday afternoon meeting at the Domain and are returning through the Botanical Gardens when Lev sees the little group having tea and approaches them. Madeleine distinguishes him first.

Madeleine’s rising voice moves over the garden towards the river.  
She’s saying, “Beautiful day.”

And I hear another recognisable voice, distant, say, “It is paradise.  
Good afternoon to you.”

It seems so quiet here, tucked away from the rumpus of the city, that one can hear a tropical pine drop its knobbed cone to the soft, green grass. A river breeze breathes an innocent storm into some hidden point of a tree’s shimmering workings. When a voice carries like that, across the green grass, it too sharpens into a kind of beauty, a rude, waking sound that nevertheless is inevitable.

This is the first instance of the word “paradise” entering the text. It is a discovery to me now, in this analysis, to see that it is Lev, not Isabel, who uses the word. Perhaps it boosts my argument that Isabel and Lev mirror each other’s desire. I hope the word is quite natural within the context and this hope

---

<sup>45</sup> The words Lev used are in fact those of Konstantin Klushin in his undated writing *Parliament and Soviet*, and I owe Dr Raymond Evans (1988, p. 86 and note 17, p. 218) acknowledgement for this quote.

is not an arbitrary whim. I agree with Wayne C. Booth's (1991, p. 197) dislike of intrusive metaphor – I would call it unnatural, or at least not natural within context.<sup>46</sup> I tried to keep this in mind whenever I was aware of the metaphorical net tightening. As for when I was not aware, I will discuss this state later.

Nevertheless, this last passage is fairly packed with authorial commentary. The “innocent storm” breathing in a tree’s “hidden workings” presage the social events over the next few months and ultimately the downfall of Lev’s Bolshevik aspiration. The sound of the tree’s “storm” is “rude” and “waking” and promises something “inevitable”. All these images also suggest Isabel’s storm, the erotic awakening she is about to endure.

### The Romance Begins

The next image of Garden enters the novel when Isabel and Madeleine join a Sunday march to the Domain with the Bolsheviks and their supporters. Isabel admits she is prepared to aspire and conspire or “whatever the word is” in order to facilitate her connection with Lev, though she hastily adds that this connection is in no way “carnal”. She is uneasy and as yet there has been no romantic movement from one to the other. Her perception of the Garden has an edgy quality in this scene. “The sun is vicious out here in the open”, she thinks. Madeleine irritates her, yet again, and she says, “I wish she’d at least raise the net of her hat. It looks ridiculous out here on waste ground, the roughest of picnics”. And when they choose their spot for this rough picnic, “The rug refuses to lie down square and I shake it again in the dead air. In the end I’m reduced to crawling around on my hands and knees to spread it out on the dried earth. One knee meets a jagged stone hidden beneath the blanket, but I can’t

---

<sup>46</sup> In his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth (1991, p. 197) states: “To my taste many of the symbols employed in modern fiction as a substitute for commentary are fully as obtrusive as the most direct commentary might be....Symbolic commentary, like any other kind, must be done with genius, or at least with craftsmanship, if it is to endure beyond the shifts in fashion” and cites (p.19) Edmund Wilson “[s]peaking of Joyce’s *Ulysses*...[who] once complained that as soon as ‘we are aware of Joyce himself systematically embroidering on his text ...the illusion of the dream is lost’”.



immediately extricate myself through the tangle of skirt and petticoat". At Lev's approach, he comes to her as threat:

There are footsteps behind me, crushing leaves blown dryly down from the Gardens. A snapped hollowed twig alerts me as if I have an animal's awareness, and I'm momentarily silenced in myself. I feel the weight of a presence. Someone seems to crouch at my back.

The garden has its hisses, just as in Dumitriu's *Incognito* (and of course its template, *Genesis*). It's a "presence", though, which is not really edged but double-edged, for the very threat both threatens and delights, the condition which is harbinger of erotic connection.

Lev begins his wooing of Isabel as he sits with the two cousins on the rug. He focuses his attention on her and tells her how it would be if he took her to Russia, to the north. I have taken Lev's description directly from the travel writing of Stephen Graham (Chapter Nine of his *Undiscovered Russia*).<sup>47</sup> Graham's book was written during the period when Lev might have made this venture himself. It is uncanny that this piece of journalism should contain the Paradise dynamic. I am certainly not aware that I chose this piece because of the metaphor. I borrowed it only for its value as a description of a certain part of Russia at a certain time authored by a man of a certain age. But the dynamic is well and truly present in this, as Lev relates it:

"If I took you into the forest, and under the pine trees to the river one night! When I was young, a student, I once slept on gathered hay, under a rosebush. The smells, all night, you would never need wine. You would not be frightened, I assure you, and you would never lose sight of me, because the sun never deserts, not during those months. Even as it sinks beneath the river, its light remains. There are clouds, small ones, but they are purple, and the sands below the cliff become crimson. And all night,

---

<sup>47</sup>The text of Stephen Graham's *Undiscovered Russia* is published in full in English on <http://vologda-oblast.ru/main.aspV?=548>. First publication: London: John Lane; New York: John Lane Company, 1912.

you lie and watch the boats far down the river, the black figures of the fishermen, and as morning comes the mist rises and sucks at the pines. The peasants say a devil comes in those white nights, tall as a pine and armoured in plaited bark and, not blessed with speech, he can only flap his arms. That's the sound you hear from the forest, do you see, it's a branch creaking or breaking, some such thing? And then perhaps a little fear comes, for after a night like that, one is no longer oneself."

### Red Poppies

When Lev finally comes to visit Isabel, after she issued an invitation to young Katherine Martin and, as if an afterthought, to the Russian Lev who lived in the same boarding house, the garden is yet again the image promising the erotic encounter. After the meal, Katherine shakes "the crumbed tablecloth over the railing [of the verandah] into the path of the garden's nocturnal life". And in the next breath, when she considers Katherine's returning back to town alone (Lev must attend a meeting elsewhere), she decides the girl must stay as "It's a dangerous time, soldiers returning ...". The garden's nocturnal life seems to remind her that their present is a dangerous time. As Lev leaves, she walks him to the front door where:

Drops of moonlight fall in through the clear glass of the windows at the front door, diamonds framing red poppies, oblongs shaping autumn-blown leaves, and in this reverse light the stained colours are quiet, almost indecipherable one from the other.

It seems the garden is following her inside – and a garden which also hints at the soldiers she has just mentioned, the young men whose comrades died among red poppies. The fields of Flanders also utter the story of Paradise. I see here in this "red poppy" image a return to my original wish to establish the main characters in a pre-War setting, an Australia far away from the brewing troubles in Europe, an Australia of sunshine and relative freedom. The trajectory was to begin in a youthful Paradise where even adults could not

imagine Australians in the horrors of the trenches. The trajectory's peak would come as war intrudes and finally the young men would return to a sober people, all of them older, wiser and less innocent. This scenario was discarded for reasons I've discussed earlier. But the poppy image is a reminder of the young soldiers' experience and perhaps illustrates that each Australian (including Isabel) perceives the war in a different light now.

The next morning, the garden seems to greet her outside the door. The bell rings:

When I pull the front door open, Lev is there with one arm resting against the wall. He's gazing over the array of pots, gardenias and palms and ferns and Heaven knows what she doesn't have there, the profusion of exotica intended to bedazzle and beguile as visitors reach the top of the steps. I gaze at them, too. Leaves have dropped all over the verandah couch; I must gather them up.

My heart thumps like the heart of a bird held in a warm hand.

Now the Garden is specifically gathered about Lev, and Isabel is the bird in his garden. The bird image returns again later and seems to express something a little different each time. Here the image is of fear and hope. This day is the time of consummation. And after it, Isabel reveals what the Garden is for her on a psychological level:

We sit in the dark, windows wide open and a full moon heavy in the sky, the night sounds of insects and frogs a little madder than usual. I have gone back to the beginning, a child again, nestling my head against his neck, comfortable on his lap. But not the child I was, never sure of myself, my play dreams often broken by a harsh cry, an annoyed clap of hands. No, as if I'm back in the garden of my grandmother's house, Aberdeen, crawled into the shade of a gardenia bush, pungent, petals silkily browning under my fingers, the air coddling and always warm, and a bee's buzzing just outside my leafy cubby-hole sending me off into a dozy state, a lady-bird's humpbacked climb up a greening stem all my concentration, its tiny

black feet keeping the quick rhythm of another universe, the precise red speckles of its tiny armour glazing my eyes.

Aberdeen is the prototype and as the novel progresses it increases in importance. The warmth of the hand holding a bird is echoed in the memory of warm air in her grandmother's garden. Somehow Lev and Aberdeen are becoming one.

Strangely, Lev also takes on the image of a bird. Isabel is afraid again and uncertain of his love. He mimics the imminent flight of an eagle:

He looks upwards through the bird-cage struts and banisters. I sense a change in him. He regrets bringing me, I think. He is an eagle, Lev, still and beautiful and languid but his eye is always on the gaze seeing what has not yet arrived, that profound stillness in him only a secretly-working preparation. Has he even forgotten I'm here, two steps behind him?

A note I wrote during the writing shows the level of perception I had about these images. I certainly display no knowledge of the metaphoric web which I now see was being woven at this time. I say:

I did not know WHO Mrs Greene was, did not know her voice, her decision-making faculty, her ability to follow her desire OR to thwart it. It became clear from the beginning of this draft that I would have to write slowly – one page a day, a quarter of my usual daily output. But her voice and the difficult engagement of the outside reality which she was so “ignorant” of according to herself even and her interior voice – in order that the reader could see this tension and understand the setting historically, politically – slowed me right down. This also allowed surprises from her VOICE to enter the actual image-making. For example, the “BIRDCAGE” of the Russian Club building staircase and Lev as “EAGLE” – this image connection was spontaneous and results from the slow and concentrated “listening” to the voice.

What is clear, however, is how “Mrs Greene” herself is apparently choosing the images. Her choice of image establishes my (the author’s) deepening hold on the metaphor as the anchor-structure of this novel. It seems that Mrs Greene uses the image of the bird to describe herself experiencing not just one singular emotion but has become a convenient holder of unworded, groping attempts at consciousness around certain key matters. Further examples of this open-endedness come up later in the novel.

Isabel takes a dip in confidence now, her belief in Lev the first victim. They return home after the “birdcage” evening on the back of a dray, which:

though hastily swept, betrays its origins with a cabbage leaf which I’ve tried to prise loose from the bench’s firm foot, my heel stabbing at it, sliding at it, but it remains there an obstinate testament to the true nature of things.

The cabbage leaf does not seem to hold a hint of Eden but rather is more like painful realities we meet on the outside. She betrays her fundamental trustlessness when she describes this outside-Eden as the truth. The true nature of things is more the colourless, sad existence of life before Lev. This is the reason she leaves Brisbane now, rather than her trumped-up excuse of accompanying the sick Paddy Martin home where he, and she, belongs. And as she walks up the path after leaving Lev, the “strong, sweet smell of gardenia is overpowering in the heat of the night, too sweet and betraying”. The gardenia is surely the same yet her perception has changed. She admits this when, as she and Paddy ride in the cab to the station, she notes:

The rest of the world is leisurely today, strolling along pathways dressed for church, swinging picnic baskets, fishermen strung out along the river banks, their rods bending with the force of the current. It’s only us in the mad rush, the horses’ hooves clouding the dust, leather and wood and metal creaking with an embarrassment of discord.

## Her Own Back Garden

She is discordant, out of harmony and under threat and so she retreats to her home on the high plateau. Something in her, however, has shifted. In her own back garden, she reconstructs an action she took in Lev's company, washing the sheets in the outside laundry, an unlikely occupation for one of her class. The original scene and this one owe their provenance to another painting I saw in the Queensland Art Gallery while on my research trip. This one, Vida Lahey's *Monday morning*, shows two women at the laundry tubs.<sup>48</sup> I don't know why the painting appealed so much to me. But it did. Of course, it speaks of class. While Isabel rebels against having live-in maids because of her attachment to her privacy, she had never done the washing before Lev "changed" her. The political symbolism is obvious. But also, I hear reverberations of Doris Lessing's heroine in *The Golden Notebook* who launders her white sheets very regularly. Perhaps in Lessing this illustrates a socio-sexual point. Yet the very intimacy of the bedding speaks of another motivation, the preparation of a fleshy bower.<sup>49</sup>

I used the image clearly borrowed from these two sources not to make a point as such. As I experience it, the novelist (and poet, I gather) is over-taken by the image rather than the other way around. When Seamus Heaney spoke from London to Irish radio after being awarded the David Cohen Prize for Literature in 2009, he said (just as did Vona Groarke) that the poem begins in ways difficult to describe – something just seen, something remembered from before. And this infiltration takes place anywhere and everywhere. Heaney became unusually inarticulate, incoherent almost as he struggled to give an answer to the journalist's question – "How do you do it?" There is something of beauty, of pleasure in it, he said. Yes, I would agree with this. Image is a

---

<sup>48</sup> Those of a certain age will recognise that, before automatic machines made it redundant, Monday was the day traditionally devoted to the washing.

<sup>49</sup> Michele Roberts (1999) also defends white sheets in her piece in *The Independent On Sunday*, "Lovers come and go but a linen cupboard is forever". She writes, "There is a scorching satire, in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, on a lady novelist rabbiting on about the almost mystical rapture of sleeping in fresh white linen. I always felt a bit sorry for this lady. Rupert Brooke, after all, went on about the rough male kiss of blankets, so I didn't see why she shouldn't rave about the smooth female bliss of clean sheets".

sensuous thing and may be pleasurable. Clive Cazeaux (2005, p. 116) cites Merleau-Ponty when he says that for there to be an experience, there has to be both the sense of objective awareness of an experience being had and the counter-pressure of a “something other” that is being encountered, and that the location of this process, importantly, is the body. I would imagine that perhaps image-making for a poet such as Heaney is a pleasurable thing in the sense of a child’s pleasure in all kinds of intimate awarenesses which may be applauded or tut-tutted. I recall hearing Elizabeth Jolley say (I have forgotten the occasion) that something “exquisite” happens in the writing of a novel. How else to state this I do not know, but I resonate with her. All this to bring home that image-making is not a matter of the intellect, or not only. It is a body thing.



Vida Lahey's *Monday morning* 1912  
Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery

## V - Transformation

Isabel has repudiated her Garden experience yet, as I said, she is undergoing transformation whether she wants it or not. She comes out of the steaming laundry and stands in her back yard:

The pear tree and the apple tree are in full greenery, heavy with thought of coming fruit. The grass is wild, too, dryly breaking under my bare feet. I'm a peasant out here, plucking pegs off the cord strung from a branch to a fence post, tossing each sun-smelted towel and wash-cloth over my shoulder. The day is truly silenced by those bells, and by this powerful intensity of light that holds me and the trees and Mabel, too, as she bends and rises at the stone sink, bends and rises. This is how it is in the old countries, peasants in the field, the quiet, holy moment as they cease labour. Can they till their fields, the people in Europe? Or has it all gone? The boys would know, among the other things they know and don't say.

Has it all gone? The trees whisper otherwise. She is heavy with coming fruit, too. This metaphoric pointer is crucial to both the novel and to the thrust of this study. Since she does not "know" of this psycho/spiritual pregnancy of hers, she cannot articulate what is happening in her narration. Rather, the metaphor "tells" it. Yet, ironically, I too was unaware of the suggestiveness of the coming fruit. The metaphor seems to have a life of its own. My attention was on a more obvious stratum, the social level – the "boys", the war in Europe and the sheer destruction. The intensity of light was one of those exquisite things for me, the writer, and I was both blinded by it and saw in the darkness.

Later there is another hint of Isabel's experience of transformation. Again, it is in the shape of a bird. Walking in a brown paddock with Norah Martin after the train refugees are released from the Showground, she sees that a "cockatoo arrows above our heads, its white body a worrying weight of light". The light disturbs her, threatens to fall on her. She is not yet ready. In the end, it is desperation which prods her to leave.



Christopher, sensing her withdrawal, dramatically takes off by train for Sydney, a possibly suicidal act given the danger of catching Spanish 'Flu. After his train pulls out, Isabel walks down to her place by the creek, but Paddy has now taken it. What this means for Paddy she can only guess, but she surely understands something of his motivation. Her language perhaps describes their mutual despair. Feeling distinctly unwanted there, she starts to turn away:

The sun is setting beyond him, collapsed into the horizon, and the sparsest light makes ghosts of the gum trees. Autumn is coming to the high country. In a handful of months the wind will whip my dampened hem against my legs, and my shoulders will round with a natural inclination to hide from the cold. How will I endure another winter up here? I turn around and walk back up the road.

Collapse, sparseness, ghosts, damp, hiding, cold, winter and endurance. This is her experience of what might be beautiful given another perception. Both she and Paddy have been expelled from Paradise. I seem to return here to the early intention of placing the young men in a kind of innocent Eden before they went to war and then seeing them as they come home, no longer innocent, no longer living in Paradise.

Since it Isabel's narration of her own story, it is only in such moments of implied symbiosis that Paddy's (and the other young soldiers') fall from a life of grace is seen from the inside. That what becomes of Paddy is elucidated at the end of the novel (in a letter to Lev) is hardly surprising when he is understood as one of Isabel's alter-egos. Another is his sister Katherine who also is mentioned in the letter. These are the young people who were driven out by the shameful truths of war. Isabel Greene is a character who "is" that generation just as she "is" the status-quo which received the war's shock-waves of revolution and expedited change.

She is also just herself, a woman in passionate love, and as such she has come to the end of her resistance.

## Aberdeen

She returns to Brisbane but by way of her grandmother's home, the legendary Aberdeen, the origin of her personal sensual memory of Garden. On her way, she is stopped at a quarantine centre and forced to camp out there until she's medically cleared. The anguish of the world enters this camp with her – the Spanish 'Flu pandemic which wiped out tens of millions just after the War and its shocking injustice. She says:

After all this time, all these years, we are being infected by the world. We lived in a fool's paradise, I suppose, though I found it so unremitting. I've been so alive these past few months, alive in all the veins and arteries, blood pulsing through, and alive in my eyes, what I've seen, alive even in what my tongue at last has said. Alive the moment I was aware of Lev. He has changed me utterly and I will never be the same again. No matter if he cares for me ultimately or not. It is my natural state, after all, to be alone.

Changed she might be but the fool's paradise seems to haunt her. What seems to happen next surprises me. Isabel's re-connection with the "real" Paradise immediately suggests its loss. The Aberdeen chapter begins:

Does everything have a shadow, even this place of bliss? I choose to forget so much....To attain to Aberdeen! It is beyond imagining, it is the nightingale in a fairy-tale cage, for only others have Aberdeen as their own. That is the hard part I choose to forget. It was here in this house, these gardens, I learned that lesson most keenly. It was like a taste of God, just once, fleetingly and denied ever after, but that one taste enough to send saints mad.

Just why Isabel/I have chosen to introduce Aberdeen in this painful way I can't answer absolutely. Is it that the image of Paradise necessarily includes expulsion? Our daily lives, after all, do not consist in a never-ending Eden. No one in their senses believes Paradise is their constant experience, even though

surely we all dream of a better life, a better place, a better way to exist. I admit that I am disappointed to read Isabel meeting this awareness so very early on in her stay at Aberdeen. I suppose my reaction reflects my own experience of expulsion and of the distance between the Paradise moment and the quotidian – and this distance creates feelings of disappointment and anger. This is a primeval desire and its denial creates an edifice called the personality. In this way, Paradise and death have much in common. I must draw the conclusion that this is the reason the “end” of the Paradise myth has come to be the vanquishing of death. I am trying here to follow my own logic in the overarching bridge of this novel, the playing out of this leit-motif. We will come to this again in the final scenes.

Within Isabel’s life story, however, her reaction to Aberdeen has more concrete explanation. Firstly, she has left her husband and her home and secondly, she is going into she knows not what. She does not know, for instance, if Lev loves her and so she might become lost between worlds. She feels abandoned. She reveals this when she describes herself out in the garden:

It’s warmer here than my crystal home high in the Tablelands, warm but not heat-clogged and dank as it is on the torrid coast. It’s perfect, somehow. The hoop pines have dropped their cones forgetfully and these are scattered over the grass in that way which still attracts me to them, all these years later. I walk over, bend and pick one up, two, examine their strange openings, the cracked vulnerability of them. They seem so abandoned.

Being in Aberdeen has brought back to her feelings of not fitting in. Her descriptions of her childhood are hazy, particularly her parental situation. In her grandmother’s house, she is one of many of the wider family but the place is not truly hers. She may taste but not have. This is her attitude to life, reinforced by her two miscarriages, and perhaps explains her wilful behaviour with Lev – her sudden departures which, on the second occasion, cause him to show his hurt and bewilderment to her though she, perversely, does not understand. We, the reader, do. But all this happens later.

Days at Aberdeen go by, but before she sets off for Brisbane and for Lev she will visit the elder Martin sister living a few miles away. Mary is married to Stephen who has moved them from their comfortable business to a bush shack, inspired as he has been by Bolsheviks he met in Europe during the war. As Madeleine drives there, a train of navvies goes by waving a Red flag. They are singing "Lev's song". She has, perhaps, re-linked to him through this episode because she now experiences a transcendent moment. Again, the bird is the image upon which she focuses:

The tiniest bird imaginable has dropped to the car's bonnet, drawn by the black glossiness perhaps. I don't move. He turns his pointed, pretty little head, darting and bobbing, surveying the lie of the land, and yet it does not recognise me. I am a rock, a fallen log or so far from his experience that I don't even exist. I watch the private intensity of his moment, his casual attendance to the daily round, the self-fulfilling meaning of it all. There is no barrier between us, no glassy windshield, no heaviness of bone and feather and hair, and I touch him with some other element, a sea-tide that brings him closer to me and I to him, brothers of blood, of ticking hearts. And in this instant he means more to me than any other thing in the whole world of stars, shooting sparks. In this presence, his and mine, I see him as he is, perfectly disgorged from the trees that bore him, and on the brink of collapse back into the forest debris. Dear bird, my beloved one.

She is acutely acting out human perception, untainted by anxiety or need. There is a sense in which she is coming into unity, not a separate, cut-off individual but a harmonious part of a whole. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty's description of this act of perception is apt:

The sensor and the sensible do not stand in relation to each other as two mutually external terms, and sensation is not an invasion of the sensor by the sensible. It is my gaze which subtends colour and the movement of my hand which subtends the object's form...As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal

the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me', I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. (Cazeaux 2005, p. 117)

### Isabel Approaches Paradise

Wherever we lie  
our bed is green.  
Our roofbeams are cedar,  
our rafters fir. (SS 1: 16-17)

Isabel is truly in the throes of transformation. Disharmony is gradually being replaced by harmony. Even so, the next description of Paradise is not of her own version. For all the ambiguities of Mary and Stephen's set-up, Isabel is entranced by her fantasy of a man and a woman in Eden. Her language begins to flourish into abundance as they drive on towards the bush home, and again the word "paradise" enters the text:

It is paradise, this place he has taken Mary and the baby. They must sip nectar. What it would be like, to be loved like that.

The road has dipped down. On both sides of us cedar trees tower, and we're assailed with the scent of leaf droppings, years upon years of rich decay, and the fresh reek from a felled log and its splintered trunk. The creek suddenly shows itself at the bend, its water not breaking even on the rocks gathered at the ford but instead forming a filmy membrane over their smooth surfaces, light-filled sparks only here and there on a sharpened edge. Madeleine makes very slow passage through the two inches of water flooding our path, the lowest point of the valley. We are part of the creek as our wheels turn, the water splashing in tiny lapping waves against the tyres. The remnants of late summer wildflowers are dying slowly along the stony banks.

“Gorgeous,” she says, and a bird screeches up on the rise, perhaps awakened from his mid-morning slumber by our peculiar intrusion.

I don’t speak at all. If I could make my own little home here, tucked among trees, a cedar house maybe; reach a bucket into the creek for water, make tea and bake bread. For Lev. Roll out pastry and feel the smooth velvet under my floury hands as I did as a child in the kitchens with Cook, her whitened hands warm on top of mine, her big, warm breast pressed against my bony back.

There is a recognition here of early memories/sensations which no doubt play a part in construction of our own Paradise myths. But I believe that the very theme of this myth indicates its root is not only psychological. I believe it is also very much linked to death and to our capacity to hope. It extends beyond the depths even of our private psychology.

### The Lock Is Sprung

the figurative language of the Song [of Songs] creates an intricate root system that firmly anchors love in the experience of the body ...<sup>50</sup> (Bloch 1998, p. 130)

Isabel’s language shifts gear as she comes closer into unity with the images of Paradise. For the writer, how else to indicate these subtle depths? Language itself is the tool, not necessarily the words individually. Rather than explanation a tone, a quality, a choice of freedom or restriction may be the instruments of revelation. Merleau-Ponty suggests this capacity when he says “the phonetic ‘gesture’ brings about ... a certain structural coordination of experience”, and this happens on both sides of the word, that is from both the speaker’s (writer’s) and the hearer’s (reader’s) position (cited in Cazeaux 2005, p. 120). The intention at the moment of writing is focused on the writer’s experience. He writes himself *into* and *out of* the sensation, the sense memory, the feeling that he evokes in words. Since the sense world is common to us all, the word evokes

---

<sup>50</sup> from Robert Alter’s “Afterword” in Bloch’s (1998, p. 130) SS.

sensation, sense memory and feeling in the reader. When this works, it must be due to the integrity of the writer's act. The more true that *into* and *out of* is, the more likely it is that the reader is brought into their own experience.

But there also is a more organisational stratum in operation. In a particular type of novel, such as *The Russian and Mrs Greene* falls into, what is secreted into the language is the metaphorical structure. It is this that "forms" the novel as much as the edifice of plot, character and theme. As Isabel's connection with Lev deepens, this "tone" I have referred to becomes more consistent in the text. He has sprung the lock and she is available to her own mythic depths. When they see each other again, he takes her to the river where another meeting with the Garden takes place:

he leads us out to a bit of riverbank that has been somehow mislaid, surrounded on three sides by the ungracious walls of storage houses and on the fourth opening out in a lapping bliss to the river itself, where tree roots are slippery as snakes....As he settles beside me, I look up at the moon, high now, distant, but still undeniable in its perfect brightness.

They are opening out to "bliss", yet she indicates her doubt with the image of "slippery" "snakes", a reference back to the Genesis story. In spite of this, her hope sees the undeniability of what is happening between them and within her. The following chapter begins with her recounting Lev's accusation that she believes in nothing. The snake is poisoning her, and threatens their bliss.

## VI – The Snake

Once again the bird arrives. As another letter from her husband comes and she allows Madeleine to read it:

I relax against the leather rest. The bird totters a drunken hop or two on the painted surface, dimly aware of the unlikely environment into which he's wandered. He turns his head sharply, directs a glassy gaze at us with one round eye. I won't tell her of Lev, not yet. It's too precious to me, too wrong.

The bird witnesses the inner life of Isabel, knows her secrets, her betrayals of trust and her desire. That he is in an "unlikely environment" perhaps heralds the ultimate leaving of Paradise. If he is she, then she is on a pinpoint of treachery and love, ready to fall Heaven knows where. Following the crucial Bolshevik march which triggered (and was an excuse for) the riots about to happen, she feels that she has toppled over on to the right side and, perhaps, is safe. Using the metaphor broken down into the river image and the colours – massed green echoing Madeleine's garden – she sees that:

The sun is low in the west now, the pandemonium behind us on the other side of the river. I am exhilarated. I have been on the knife edge. There is a brilliance in the dying light, an almost overwhelming beauty in the massed green and lilac and orange of the sky.

When she, Lev and Lucy arrive at the Vershkov's apartment, she perceives it in this way: "The balcony is narrow but nevertheless there are two chairs perched out there and pots of greenery. She's made a home for herself and her husband, little Lucy, their island". Their own paradise.

The interlude which follows consists of a night and day when they are threatened by attack from a mob and a police raid. While Isabel is becoming one with them (though not in her heart, as she admits – too much a sceptic by



nature), she is privy to the upheavals befalling the Russian Bolsheviks in Brisbane at that moment in time. This unsettles her vestiges of belief in justice and in the society to which she belongs even coolly. Paradise appears in another guise the next day:

The hall has the appalled jokiness of a cornfield ravaged by crows. The underside of chairs, bare legs stuck up in the air, reveal too much. The velvet stage curtain lies in a crimson pool, vandalised by boot prints.

The river image is now crimson, reminiscent of blood. The field is ravaged and has been vandalised. Things are not right. This rumbling of things to come does not, however, break her deepening harmony with her own passion for Lev and his for her. That afternoon, the Russians recuperate by sitting, drinking, eating by the river where earlier the two lovers had come. Isabel's language tells of her inner experience:

The water is warm. I sit under an over-hanging branch, its lower leaves lapping in the current which I would otherwise not perceive. They float flat as boats and then lift, dripping, the green wood tugging like a fishing line against the breeze and the subtle tide. The leaves drop again, straining towards the sea. My toes and ankles are pearly white under the surface. I sway my feet from side to side. I feel I could walk on this water, I am so light, the river as much a part of me as the sun in my eyes.

### O Woman In The Garden<sup>51</sup>

Again, she comes into unity with all that shares Paradise with her. She is in harmony. In reality, of course, she has had too much vodka, too little sleep and experienced turmoil and violence such as she's never seen before. But she is with Lev and their mutual passion brings all else to nothing. Some passages down, she describes this passion in terms of the river environment:

---

<sup>51</sup> A phrase from SS 8:13.

We all wait, a little army strewn out along the bank, mellowed with exhaustion, with the sun, with the sensation of lying together in the late summer afternoon, dipping bread, passing the volcanic bottles from one to the next. I curl up on the ground, my chest against the smooth, rock-like vein of a root, the side of my face pressed into it. I want to kiss it passionately and long, this darling root entirely mine as my blood and my skin and Lev's skin are mine, and entirely all I've ever desired. I wish that he could come to me now and his shadow lower itself to me, the weight of his body take the rise and fall of my breath.

Another night of violence happens and the Russians are now on the run. Lev takes Isabel to a market garden on the outskirts of town, where the Chinese farmers are happy to take them into their protection. The next morning, Isabel waits outside:

The earth melts under my feet, drenched from a night of rain. My shoes are not meant for this mud oozing over the leather and my heels sink and suck. The downpour has brought a shimmering green to all the vegetation, the trees along the road, the cabbage leaves, and has released a sweetness from the soil that floats over it like a river mist. The beds and rills cover every available piece of land right up to the fenced boundaries on all sides of the house. One more drill of cucumbers, just another tripod of runner beans, they must have said. These people alarm me, their robes, long plaits down their backs, eyes that never meet one's own.

The metaphor has gathered in a new element here. The Chinese, friends of the Bolsheviks, have dedicated their Paradise to a societal organisation. The transforming of the Garden is beginning to take place. Isabel, however, is alarmed.

## Expulsion

Nevertheless she has crossed the Rubicon. A few days later, as she walks to the boarding house to see if Lev is safe, she finds herself in the midst of metamorphosis:

The breeze blows through me; I am almost not here. I'd thought the ground solid, unyielding even. But it isn't. It shifts and sinks and so does everything on it. I walk under the trees and my blouse billows. Leaves and flower-heads drop in front of me.

Madeleine and I change places now.

That she uses Garden imagery here suggests the continuing trajectory of an underlying shift in her character from the beginning of her narrative to her final letter. Not only her outward life is changing irrevocably but also her inner life. But there is more hurt to come, a further attack on her psychic engagement with the Garden. Her worst fears are being realised when Marina comes to see her. Isabel is called out to the verandah of Madeleine's house:

Marina stands from the bamboo couch as I approach. I've forgotten to put on slippers. A dead-head of gardenia, dropped since the early morning sweeping and already stained brown with uncanny decay, oozes under my foot.

The chapter ends here and the reader finds out only later that Marina has informed Isabel of Lev's arrest and possible deportation. But the imagery already reveals enough.

## Losing Lev

If Lev leaves, where is Isabel's Paradise after all? Everything that was sensuous and glorious about Brisbane fades as Lev is sent south. She follows him:

The light has drained out of Brisbane and I have no desire to be there any longer. I'm glad it's behind me. I am drawn down the railway track southwards like a bee to a flower, the tide to the shore.

For Isabel, Paradise has moved down the track. She does not know that her next sensation of the Garden will be her last with Lev, at least in the way she has been used to experience:

I lay awake much of the night, thinking of him. We breathed the same high air, felt the same cold breeze as it made branches creak, rattled windows. And when dawn came, we both heard the first kookaburras laughing through the bush. The morning light touched our eyelids at the same moment.

And then, they are separate, lost to each other:

We are lost in the storm of smoke, standing there in our bush town, the vast reaches of the country all around us to the south and the north, the east and the west, and beyond that to the oceans that cosset us and keep us separate.

Isabel falls prey to the influenza pandemic and in her delirium, her Garden images become frightening, bloated. The river is a swollen sea, tossing her. Seaweed replaces flowers. The bird has become a nightmare: "The ceiling circles like a hawk, the sun glinting with awful inevitability around the edges of its blackened wings." She seems to be back where she started. When she's released from hospital, she's driven to her old home. Her defeat seems inevitable:

The frost has killed off my hydrangeas. Even the soil beds beside the pathway look brutalised. A whitish hoar like the trail of a mad snail webs across it and the poor crumbled earth is cracked as winter lips. What did I expect? Trying for the impossible.

## VII – But Too Much Has Changed

When Norah Martin delivers a posy to her sickbed, Isabel smells the boronia and thinks of the dry crackle of bush, of the lone screech of a bird. Again being the bird, she reveals herself or at least her worst fear of her old self returning. But her fear will not be realised. Too much has changed. Walking in her country town, she finds that:

The sky seems so clear. But it is an uncertain sameness. I gaze and find at last a winter sun, barely visible. The weak membrane of haze had seemed so perfect. Yet there is that one watery spot. My eyes narrow at the unexpected brightness. Anyway there is heat in it, a warming of the bones.<sup>52</sup>

She sees the unexpected brightness in spite of it all. The metaphoric trajectory, and the limited images Isabel has constructed it on, has been saying what might have been said in dialogue or narrative explanation. Incrementally, Isabel has come into Paradise, into her own Garden. In spite of the sadness of her last scene with Norah Martin and the tragic tone of their barely worded conversation, she is no longer cold.

Isabel's "last act" is her letter to Lev. She has attained Aberdeen. She describes her garden there in pragmatic terms, the bougainvillea which has defeated her and which, upon its threatened replacement, suddenly bursts into bloom. She writes of herself on the verandah: "[t]hink of me in the heat, my feet propped up on a footstool, perched in the corner of the verandah to catch

---

<sup>52</sup> The perfection marred by "one watery spot" is an echo of my favourite passage in Pasternak's (1961) *Doctor Zhivago*. Chapter 25 in The Journey section opens with a description of the train taking the fleeing family away from Moscow. They pass a "young coppice" where only one thing was "superfluous and untidy; perhaps dirt or an inflammation causing them to swell; and this untidiness, superfluity and dirt were the signs of life which had already set the most forward of the trees on fire with its green leafy flame." That the untidy is the place where new life resides was a reflection and image of great significance for me when I first read it and, as I have said elsewhere, the "affects" certain images (or reflections) have on a novelist can cause a spontaneous echo in her own work. The Pasternak passage is on p.237 of the Heywood translation.

the breeze”. She describes her settling in Aberdeen as “like catching fairy dust”. But she has caught it, though she finds it almost unbelievable.

In her letter, she wants Lev to share in this Paradise. She urges him to retrieve his book of Pushkin from where he has tossed it to the bottom of his wardrobe. Beauty is in your hands, she tells him, though the world be as it is. She then lets him know that he himself – or certainly the erotic love she has felt for him – was her key into the Garden. Is this why Lev says that his death “is a small thing”? He was re-reading her letter the night before his arrest. In spite of his fear, he still feels there is more to him than the events which have betrayed him. In fact, there is more to their love than their physical presence to one another. They have become closer, he says, over the years of their separation as long as the love between them is acknowledged and alive.

The Epilogue of the novel perhaps alludes to the vanquishing of death hinted at it in the *Song of Songs*<sup>53</sup> and more specifically illustrated in the story told in *John 20: 11-18* of Mary of Magdala meeting her Beloved in the garden. Lev speaks of the same intimation when he says their mutual love “would reach beyond the hilarious drama that had been his life, too”. In the next sentence, referring to his fate at the hands of the Soviet secret police, he comments that “the outcome was yet to be proved”. He might also suggest that the same comment can be made about his just stated assertion. The myth has formed over millennia that the Garden is regained beyond mortality. Whether it is so is yet to be proved.

### The Hope

Isabel finishes the novel as the last pages of her letter are torn away by icy wind and what remains are her final words, an unfinished sentence. Yet they are words of hope:

---

<sup>53</sup> “...for love is as fierce as death...  
Great seas cannot extinguish love,  
no river can sweep it away.” (SS 8:6-7.)

Marina and Yuri will come here just after Christopher leaves. They and their two youngest. The eldest girl married in spring. Imagine! It was a gorgeous wedding, real Russian style. If you'd been there, we would have danced and danced and

There is a never-ending quality to “danced and danced and [ ]”. From her unbelievable condition of attainment of Aberdeen, she lends to Lev her faith in the infinity of love. As he goes to meet his death (in all probability, given the history of the Stalinist period) her words go with him.

## VIII – The End of the Garden Story

For though that seat of earthly bliss be fail'd,  
A fairer paradise is founded now

(Milton 1968, p. 350)

In the course of many generations, some symbols become embedded in the soul (Lawrence 1979, p. 544). If this is actually what happens, then surely the symbol of the paradisiacal Garden is one such. The Garden tells the story of Everywoman, and hence its recurring power. Judith Wright (1971, p. 253) beautifully expresses her “poet’s” task in this way: “to dig from my depths the image of man's unfinished heart”.

At the start, I said it was extremely difficult for the author to discuss the creation of her characters in context of “whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings” (Price 1975b, p. 379) and so I concentrated on the “formal properties”. These now have given way to that identification with the figure standing behind the novel’s character. That is to say with the “more or less bleeding participants” of whom the human writer writes (James 1934, p. 328).

‘We always arrive, in the final analysis,’ Bakhtin was not afraid to say, ‘at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being’.  
(Brenkman 2000, p. 304)

The bleeding participants of my story end up like this:

- Norah Martin expelled from home;
- Katherine expelled from home, loss of her love, she is cause of loss of family solidarity;
- Paddy’s last decade and early death testimony to his loss of youthful innocence;



- Stephen goes back to business therefore expulsion from his young dream;
- Lev has lost his hopes in new state and also probably his life – the expulsion from Paradise of the Genesis story;
- Isabel has also lost: at the end of her narration, Norah says to her, “I didn’t think it would be like this, did you?” and she answers, “No”. But she also has risen above this loss.

In the Epilogue, Isabel reveals that she has regained Paradise and vanquished death, just as the stories tell in *Song of Songs* and the Gospel of *John*. She has lived the trajectory of the myth for which her back-story made her a candidate. Whispers of her childhood and the projection of her desire on to the unattainable Aberdeen introduced her to the imagery. When she suffered the erotic blow which prised open the Garden in her, she was already slowly breaking down: her continuing grief over the loss of her unborn children, the stagnation of her marriage, the shattering of her belief systems, her shared agony as the grim results of the War confronted the earlier Chauvinistic optimism.

Her disappointment, which I’ve suggested is a major theme of the novel, was the mirror for the political tale. Isabel’s experience echoes the wider historical story of the Soviet experiment and to that extent she has been “used” for this purpose. There is a crucial difference in that her personal resolution is not an exact fit with history. Though who knows what time may bring? The novel was not meant as a polemic against one particular political system.

What is clear is that my very early attachment to the Garden of Eden motif, illustrated “feelingly” for me in Dumitriu’s *Incognito*, was not abandoned. *Incognito* presents a Garden of Eden in its opening chapters. I intended to present my own cast in much the same way. I wanted to paint a picture of them in pre-War days, young, far away from strife, idylling in the paradise of Australia. Much as in *Incognito*, I intended to show the youthful characters in their innocence and early sensualities, a play which would contrast with their changed personalities and perceptions after the horrors of war. The novel as it now stands indeed has abandoned all these preliminaries. A sense of order grew as I wrote early drafts of chapters and it became apparent that I would have to

focus in and tighten up the time frame. I decided to enter the story in 1918, almost at the end of the war and long after innocence was lost. Yet this image of the Garden of Eden somehow survived in other forms. The Garden is the “meaning” of my original intention. Once Isabel Greene had become both the narrator and central character, “the garden” became hers. And so the Garden metaphor had gone underground, relating the inner life of a middle-aged woman undergoing the same symbolic shifts.

It has gone underground in two senses. The metaphorical structure, which I have shown underpins the novel, is not “up-front” as is the plot, say, or the character of Mrs Greene. But also, the Garden went underground in me, the writer. I was not aware of this structure or indeed that many of the images Isabel perceives during her narration were part of the overall metaphor. It happened, but I did not engineer it in any formal sense.

Aristotle’s (1965, pp. 61-9) classification of metaphor as *transference* differentiates the process from imitation only by complexity of intent. For the philosopher, the “great natural ability” implied by good use of metaphor is a mark of a capacity for perceiving resemblances.<sup>54</sup> Aristotle is honouring the faculty of human intellect. But authors know they do not always “know”. This “perception of resemblances” can be a semi-conscious or even unconscious thing. Often, the three levels of consciousness (that we in our time are aware of, shall I say) are present at the same moment in the act of writing.

What has struck me most forcefully during this study is how little I “knew” of the web of metaphor which seems to have knit original intent with eventual theme. I cannot claim to have engineered the spinning out of the myth of Paradise through the text. Yet it is there, nonetheless. Perhaps Isabel knew more than I. Fancifully, I could say Isabel understood the meaning of my novel long before I did. For that, I admit she was the right choice after all.

I began this exploration of how I found and “made” Isabel with a remark by George Steiner, where he recorded Tolstoy’s sense of Anna Karenina having evolved as a character unexpectedly and even beyond his will. Following this, Steiner continued:

---

<sup>54</sup> I will not discuss here the argument about metaphor joining dissimilars or, to say it differently, “the collision of images”. But see Karsten Harries (1978), especially pp. 81-3.

At some moments in the dynamics of the subconscious, witness Henry James's notebooks, the initial 'germ', the incident, memory, felt configuration, from which the work develops, modulate into a vision or programme of unison. But whether the poet, dramatist, or novelist truly sees his text as an interactive whole, or whether the claim to such perception is, where it is made, itself a necessary fiction, remains uncertain. (Steiner 1986, p. 289)

He is quite right, I believe, in bowing to the "subconscious" developments in a novel. This is how it is, in practice. The novelist drives blind, but not without an inner map. In *The Russian and Mrs Greene* the metaphor of the Garden has been my roadway and, though I have steered without seeing much of the time, the very act of arriving just where I intended tells me that that my map is real.

Has Isabel ended up in the right place? I set myself the task of answering that question. If the trajectory of the metaphor of the Garden as formed in the West through Judeo-Christian scriptures is seen as symbolically potent in this novel, then the answer is yes. She has tasted Paradise, lost it and found it.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Abbot, H. Porter 1993, "Character and Modernism: Reading Woolf Writing Woolf" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Spring) "Reconsiderations", Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 393-405.
- Aristotle 1965, "On the Art of Poetry" in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T. S. Dorsch, Penguin Classics, London.
- Aristotle 1987, *De Anima*, Penguin Classics, London.
- Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, trans. J. I. Beare, viewed in 2009 on The Internet Classics Archive, producer Stevenson, Daniel C., of Web Atomics, [www.classics.mit.edu/aristotle/memory](http://www.classics.mit.edu/aristotle/memory).
- Arpaia, Bruno 2006, *The Angel of History*, trans. Minna Proctor, Canongate, Edinburgh.
- Atwood, Margaret 2002, *Negotiating With The Dead*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Australia's Yesterdays: A Look At Our Recent Past* 1979, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Reader's Digest Services, Sydney.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail 1984, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature Volume 8, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Barnes, Jonathan 1987, *Early Greek Philosophy*, Penguin Books, London.
- Bayley, John 1966, review of Harvey's "Character and the Novel" in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 17, No. 68 (Nov.), pp. 451-3.
- Bayley, John 1974, "Character and Consciousness" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter), pp.225-235.
- Benjamin, Walter 1969, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York.
- Berger, Peter L. 1979, *A Rumour of Angels*, Pelican Books, London.
- Bezeczky, Gábor 1994, "Contending Voices in Bakhtin" in *Comparative Literature*, Volume 46, No. 4 (Fall), pp. 321-345.

- Binding, Paul 2004, "In paths of light" in *The [London] Independent on Sunday*, 16 May 2004, ABC p. 28.
- Bloch, Ariel and Bloch, Chana 1998, *The Song of Songs, A New Translation* (SS), University of California Press.
- Booker, Christopher 2004, *The Seven Basic Plots*, Continuum, London.
- Booth, Wayne C. 1991, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Penguin, London.
- Brenkman, John 2000, "On Voice". *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 33. No. 3 (Summer), pp. 281-306.
- Brock, Rita Nakashima and Parker, Rebecca Ann 2008, *Saving Paradise*, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Brontë, Emily 1959, *Wuthering Heights*, New American Library, New York.
- Brooks, Peter 1988, "The Tale vs. The Novel" in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 21, No. 2/3 (Winter-Spring), "Why the Novel Matters: A Postmodern Perplex Conference Issue", pp. 285-292.
- Brooks, Peter 1996, "Reading for the Plot", in Hoffman and Murphy's *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Duke University Press, Durham.
- Carroll, Joanne 2005, *The Italian Romance*, UQP, Brisbane.
- Carroll, Joanne 1996, *In The Quietness of My Aunt's House/Bad Blood: Two novellas*, UQP, Brisbane.
- Carroll, Joanne 2007, "The Unblooded Author" in *Griffith Review*, Issue 17: Staying Alive, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Carroll, Joanne, unpublished, *The Rhapsody of Sweeney*.
- Cazeaux, Clive, 2005, "From sensation to categorization: aesthetic metaphor in Locke and Merleau-Ponty" in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Vol 4, No's 2 and 3, pp. 111-124.
- Cixous, Helene and Cohen, Keith 1974, "The Character of Character" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter) Changing Views of Character, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 383-402.
- Conrad, Joseph 1967, "The Highest Kind of Justice to the Visible Universe" in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick, The Free Press, New York, pp. 29-30.

- Crane, R. S. 1967, "The Concept of Plot" in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick, The Free Press, New York, pp. 141-4.
- Dumitriu, Petru 1964, *Incognito*, trans from French by Norman Denny, 2<sup>nd</sup> Impression (September 1964), Collins, London.
- Duras, Marguerite 1990, *Practicalities*, Collins, London.
- DuVerlie, Claud and Rodgers, James and Simon, Claude 1987, "The Novel as Textual Wandering: An Interview with Claude Simon" in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 1.
- Eckhart, Meister 1992, "Sermon LXXXIV, Like the Morning Star" in Franz Pfeiffer's *Works of Meister Eckhart*, Kessinger Publishing Co., Montana, pp. 210-4.
- Evans, Raymond 1988, *The Red Flag Riots*, UQP, Brisbane.
- Evans, Raymond and Ferrier, Carole eds. 2004, *Radical Brisbane*, Vulgar Press, Carlton North.
- Fitzgerald, Penelope 2000, *The Means of Escape*, Flamingo, London.
- Fitzgerald, Penelope 2003, *The Beginning of Spring*, Flamingo, London.
- Fitzgerald, Penelope 2004, *The Gate of Angels*, Flamingo, London.
- Fitzgerald, Penelope 2005, *House of Air*, Fourth Estate, London.
- Friedman, Norman 1967, "Forms of the Plot", *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick, The Free Press, New York, pp. 145-166.
- Genette, Gérard 1980, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Genette, Gérard 1988, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.
- Graham, Stephen, *Undiscovered Russia*. The text is published in full in the original English on <http://vologda-oblast.ru/main.aspV?=548>. First publication London: John Lane; New York: John Lane Company, 1912.
- Hagan, John 1969, "Patterns of Character Development in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: Nicholas, Natasha and Mary" in *PMLA* Vol. 84, No. 2 (Mar.), pp. 235-244.

- Halliday, Ken 2002, *In The Sunrise Shadows of Coolamangeera*, Tenterfield Southern Communities Historical Group, Tenterfield NSW.
- Harries, Karsten 1978, "Metaphor and Transcendence" in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn), Special Issue on Metaphor, pp. 73-90.
- Harvey, W. J. 1965, *Character and the Novel*, Chatto & Windus, London.
- Heaney, Seamus 1997, "St. Kevin and the Blackbird" in *The Spirit Level*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, pp. 24-6.
- Hedermann, Mark Patrick 2000, *Manikon Eros: Mad, Crazy Love*, Veritas Publications, Dublin.
- Hedermann, Mark Patrick 2001, *The Haunted Inkwell*, The Columba Press, Dublin.
- Hoffmann, Michael J. and Murphy, Patrick D. eds. 1966, *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Duke University Press, Durham.
- Holy Bible, The*, Revised Standard Version (RSV), Cath. ed.
- "Isaiah", *The Holy Bible (RSV)*.
- James, Henry 1934, *The Art of the Novel*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.
- Jahn, Gary R. 1982, "The Unity of Anna Karenina", in *Russian Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr.), pp. 144-158.
- Joseph, B. L. 1950, "A Seventeenth-Century Guide to Character Writing" in *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Apr.), Oxford University Press, p. 144
- "John, Gospel of ", in *The Holy Bible (RSV)*.
- Kermode, Frank 2003, *Pieces of My Mind: Writings 1958-2002*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, London.
- Kreeft, Peter 1990, *Summa of the Summa*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco.
- Kundera, Milan 2005, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, Faber & Faber, London.
- Lawrence, D. H. 1979, *A Selection from Phoenix* ed. by A.A.H. Inglis, Penguin, London.
- Leacock, N.K. 2002, "Character, Silence and The Novel: Walter Benjamin on Goethe's 'Elective Affinities'" in *Narrative* 10.3 (Oct.): 277 (30).

- Leaska, Mitchell A. 1996, "The Concept of Point of View" in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, ed. Hoffman and Murphy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Duke University Press, Durham, pp. 163-4.
- Lodge, David, 1992, *The Art of Fiction*, Penguin Books, London.
- Macauley, Robie and Lanning, George 1964, *Technique in Fiction*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Martin, Valerie 2003, *Property*, Abacus, London.
- Mendilow, A. A. 1967, "The Position of the Present in Fiction" in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevick, The Free Press, New York, pp. 255-280.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 2002, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Routledge, London and New York.
- Messerli, Douglas 1984, "The Role of Voice in Nonmodernist Fiction" in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Autumn) pp. 281-304.
- Milton, John 1968, *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, Airmont Publishing Company, New York.
- Moorehead, Alan 1958, *The Russian Revolution*, Collins, London.
- Murdoch, Iris 1993, *Metaphysics As A Guide to Morals*, Penguin Books, London.
- Nolan, Albert 2006, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, Orbis Books, New York.
- Nussbaum, Martha 1986, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Pasternak, Boris, 1958, *Dr Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari, Collins & Harvill Press, London.
- Pfeiffer, Franz 1992, *Works of Meister Eckhart*, Kessinger Publishing Co., Montana.
- Price, Martin 1975a, "People of the Book: Character in Forster's 'A Passage to India'" in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (March), pp. 605-622.
- Price, Martin 1975b, "The Logic of Intensity: More On Character" in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter), pp. 369-379.
- "Psalms", *The Holy Bible (RSV)*.



- Richardson, Henry S. 1995, "Desire and The Good in De Anima" in *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, Martha C. Nussbaum and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (eds.), Clarendon Paperbacks, Oxford.
- Roberts, Michele 1999, "Lovers come and go but a linen cupboard is forever", *The Independent On Sunday*, Life and Style Section, 20 February, 1999. Can be accessed on Internet at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/design-lovers-come-and-go-but-a-linen-cupboard-is-forever-1071943.html>>
- Ross, Stephen M. 1979, "'Voice' in Narrative Texts: The Example of As I Lay Dying" in *PMLA*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (March), pp. 300-10.
- Roudiez, Leon S. 1962, "Characters and Personality: The Novelist's Dilemma" in *The French Review*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (May), pp. 553-562.
- Ryan, J. S. (ed.) 2002, *Writing Tenterfield: A Collection of Historical, Cultural and Other Essays*, Faculty of Arts, University of New England, Armidale.
- Scholes, Robert and Kellogg, Robert 1968, *The Nature of Narrative*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Schorer, Mark 1967, "Technique as Discovery" in *The Theory of the Novel*, Philip Stevick (ed.), The Free Press, New York, pp. 65-84.
- Shroder, Maurice A. 1967, "The Novel As a Genre" in *The Theory of the Novel*, Philip Stevick (ed.), The Free Press, New York, pp. 13-29.
- Staeger, Jason 2008, "Journey Deep Into His Soul", (interview with Richard Flanagan), *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 8, 2008.
- Steiner, George 1986, *Antigones*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Stevick, Philip 1967, *The Theory of the Novel*, The Free Press, New York.
- Stoehr, Taylor 1968, "Tone and Voice" in *College English*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 150-161.
- Striedter, Juri 1992, "Journeys through Utopia: Introductory Remarks to the Post-Revolutionary Utopian Novel" in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 3, No. 1. (Winter) Types of the Novel Semiotics of Social Discourse, pp. 33-60.
- Tenterfield*, 1949, prepared by Norman Crawford, Back to Tenterfield Week Committee 1949.

- Tenterfield Star, The. Back copies of articles relevant to Spanish Influenza 1918/1919.
- Thomson, David 1990, *Europe Since Napoleon*, Penguin, London.
- Tolstoy, Leo 1987, *A Confession, and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish. Penguin, London.
- Tolstoy, Leo 1960, *What is Art?*, trans. Alymer Maude, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis.
- Trotsky, Leon 1923, *Communist Policy Towards Art*, my copy transcribed for the Internet by Andy Blunden,  
[www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1923/tia23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1923/tia23.htm)
- Weimann, Robert 1974, "Shakespeare and the Study of Metaphor", in *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 On Metaphor, pp. 149-167.
- Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utopian> 2009, viewed June, 2009.
- Williams, William Carlos, "The Dance", in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Vol. II 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher McGowan, New Directions, New York, pp. 407-8.
- Wilson, A.N. 1989, *Tolstoy*, Penguin Books, London.
- Wilson, Rawdon 1979, "The Bright Chimera: Character as a Literary Term" in *Critical Inquiry*, The University of Chicago Press, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer), pp. 725-749.
- Wilson, Rawdon 1980, "Drawing New Lessons from Old Masters: The Concept of 'Character' in the 'Quijote'", in *Modern Philology*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (November), pp. 117-138.
- Wolfe, Peter 2004, *Understanding Penelope Fitzgerald*, University of South Carolina Press.
- Wright, Judith 1965, *The Generations of Men*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Wright, Judith 1971, "New Guinea Legend: The Finding of the Moon" in *Collected Poems 1942-1970*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, pp. 246-253.
- Yeats, W.B. 1965, "Long-Legged Fly", published in *W B Yeats Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares, Macmillan London Ltd Pocket Papermacs, London, p. 197.

Young, Pam 1991, *Proud to be a Rebel: The life and times of Emma Miller*, 1<sup>st</sup> published UQP, Brisbane, reprinted with permission at the POD Centre, UQ.

Other media:

Southbank, LWT, 1983 documentary film on *Alberto Moravia*.

Paintings:

Lahey, Vida 1912, *Monday morning*, courtesy Queensland Art Gallery.

Originally gift of Madame Emily Coungeau through the Queensland Art Society 1912.

Rivers, R. Godfrey 1903, *Under the jacaranda*, courtesy Queensland Art Gallery.